

Tiger Claw

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Summary: Quarreling fiancees and angry challengers are nothing new to Ranma, but this time, things turn unexpectedly violent when the true power of the Neko-ken is revealed in all its dark power.

1. Part 1

> <meta name="generator"> Ranma 1/2 - Tiger Claw (part 1)

> TIGER CLAW
 Part 1: NO MORE PUSSYFOOTING AROUND
> ----- <p>

A Ranma 1/2 fanfic by Madamhydra@aol.com

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> IMPORTANT NOTE:

This is a continuation/ALTERNATE REALITY fanfic. While the story follows the manga (and video) continuity to just after Mount Phoenix (volume 38), the subsequent wedding ceremony (and the related bombing by Shampoo and Ukyo) does NOT occur. In this story, a different incident involving the planned wedding took place.
> <p>

Only a limited number of the main characters have actually SEEN the Neko-ken (the Tendos, Genma, Shampoo, Cologne, Gosunkugi or Sasuke, and Kuno), although others may have heard rumors about it.

> Text Conventions

() - thoughts

> <p>

- sound fx

> <p>

" " - Chinese

> <p>

Curse forms are denoted by appropriate suffixes (-chan, -neko, -panda, etc.) except for Ryoga (P-chan) and Mousse (Muu-Muu).

[The present....]

Standing just a few meters from the entrance to the Tendo compound, Nabiki saw Mousse running down the street toward her. It had already been a profitable morning. Now she sensed another money-making opportunity. Nabiki briskly stepped through the gate to fetch her camcorder... and stopped dead in her tracks as she struggled to take in the scene before her.

Blood was everywhere, lying in puddles and splattered all over the entranceway. Deep claw marks scarred the stone walkway and nearby walls. To one side, Ukyo stood over a nude, familiar-looking man lying sprawled face down on the ground. He was still and unmoving, pinned under the shattered remains of a large tree. In her hands, Ukyo anxiously clutched what looked like a torn piece of striped blue cloth.

Ryoga's naked and bloodied body lay on the walkway, surrounded by the shredded remains of a yellow tiger skin. A very subdued Shampoo knelt beside him. Mrs. Saotome was only a few steps away, clutching a familiar katana in her hands. Kodachi stood off to the side. She stared at nothing in particular, apparently oblivious to and unmoved by her surroundings.

"...."

Nabiki opened her mouth but found she couldn't get out a single word. For a stupefied second, she wondered if Ranma's fiancées and/or the sword-wielding Mrs. Saotome had been responsible for all the bloodshed. Then she caught sight of her white-faced sister.

"N-N-Nabiki!" stammered Akane.

Lurking just behind her was Ranma, crouched in his familiar four-footed Neko-ken stance. He ignored Nabiki. Instead, his

attention was totally fixed on Ryoga.

Losing her usual icy self-control, Nabiki blurted out the first thing that popped into her mind.

"Akane, what the hell set him off THIS time!?"

Raising her voice was not the wisest thing for Nabiki to do. It had the unfortunate effect of catching Ranma's attention. He suddenly snapped his head around. Now he was staring at HER. She flinched when she saw the fresh blood smeared on his face and the fierce, predatory gleam in his blue-gray eyes.

(What the hell...?)

Ranma's eyes suddenly narrowed and he bared his teeth ever so slightly. An ominous growl rumbled forth from his throat, then he lunged at her.

As Nabiki frantically backed up, her only thought was, (Oh shit...!)

> Part 1a: Cat's-Paws

[The night before....]

A beautiful, russet-haired sorceress named Yonoko was busily preparing for her upcoming battle. After two years of constant surveillance and planning, she was finally ready.

She glanced through her operatives' reports to confirm the delivery of all the messages. One for the fathers and one for the old pervert, to prevent any interference. Four messages, one for each woman, to sow chaos and confusion. And now for the target....

Yonoko pulled out a recent photo of Ranma Saotome and smiled slightly in appreciation. The picture had been taken just a few days ago by her source inside the Tendo Dojo. It showed Saotome standing in the courtyard, one arm thrown up in a block. His body was perfectly poised to either defend or attack. Even though she only had a profile view of his face, she could sense the intense focus, the unusual strength of both mind and body. Her fingers slowly trailed over the photo. She traced the broad shoulders and the strong, sleek lines of the chest and arm muscles exposed by his tank top. In less than two years, since his arrival in Nerima, Saotome had changed from a mere boy into quite a handsome and formidable young man.

(If only....)

Yonoko sighed and shook her head to clear the wistful fantasies from her brain. Pulling out a strip of paper inscribed with mystical script, she focused her power and uttered a soft phrase. The paper vanished in a puff of smoke. Yonoko then inspected her altered appearance in the mirror and grinned dangerously. Picking up two tiger skin belts lying on a nearby table, she murmured, "Now to round up the two challengers. Get ready, boys. The Tiger Lily is coming to

pay you a visit."

It was midnight in a forested mountain area, not too far from Nerima. Ryoga Hibiki stared into his campfire, brooding about the overwhelming injustice of the world. After the incredible disasters surrounding the announcement of a Saotome-Tendo wedding nine months ago, Ryoga had finally given up on Akane. Instead, he had chosen to devote his attentions to Akari. However, as weeks and months passed, it hadn't been enough for him.

Oh, Akari was pleasant, understanding, and certainly affectionate. More importantly, his Jusenkyo curse didn't bother her. He liked her a good deal, but his 'liking' for Akari was only a pale shadow compared to his burning passion for Akane Tendo. He had firmly intended to leave Nerima and the people there far behind him. However, he eventually ended up spending more and more time back at the Tendo dojo and in Akane's arms.

And it seemed that even sweet-tempered Akari had her limits. Faced with Akari's tearful demand that he pick either her or Akane Tendo, he had chosen Akane.

Ryoga muttered aloud, "And when I finally get back to Nerima, what happens? Ranma runs me over and grinds my face into the dirt. Like he always does!"

He had naturally retaliated. However, his opponent had gone straight for his weak spot, as usual. A quick splash of cold water and instant victory for Ranma. After all, what could harmless little P-chan do? Ranma's absent-minded attitude during yesterday's fight made the incident even more infuriating.

He shook his fist in the air. "How dare he mock me like that! When I get back to Nerima, I'll show him that he can't ignore Ryoga Hibiki!"

But for now, all Ryoga could do was sit by his lonely campfire. He was hopelessly lost, as usual. That was annoying enough, but in the last couple of months, his utter lack of direction had become a true source of torment.

It was all because Akane was starting to act as if she actually liked Ranma. He could only hope that it was a temporary phase that would soon go away.

(After all, a terrific girl like Akane could never really lov... care about a rude, insensitive pervert like Ranma, right?)

However, a single nightmarish vision continued to haunt him. He could just imagine himself staggering back into Nerima after long months of wanderings, only to find Ranma and Akane married. Then Ranma would laugh and whisper something into Akane's ear about P-chan....

A soft, sultry woman's voice interrupted his thoughts. "Ryoga Hibiki."

He stiffened in surprise. (Huh!? How did she sneak up on me?) He quickly looked around and caught a flicker of motion overhead in a

nearby tree. He leapt back from his campfire and his simmering meal. Away from the glare of the firelight, he saw the shadowy form of a woman perched on a low branch. Ryoga couldn't make out her face but he could tell that she was on the small side and had a curvaceous figure. A stray wind gust sent long strands of bright red hair floating in the breeze.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Perhaps a friend.... You have a rival called Ranma Saotome?"

"What about him?" Ryoga muttered sullenly.

"I know that he's a superb fighter. He has the woman you want. And you're at his mercy regarding your secret identity as a little black pig called P-chan." She seemed to float, not jump, down from the branch and landed a few steps away from him.

Ryoga's eyes bulged in surprise. "You... you know about that? How...?"

She chuckled softly. "I have my sources. You've had very little success against Ranma, haven't you? Oh, you've occasionally come close to beating him in combat. You may have actually won once or twice. But fighting doesn't help, does it? No matter what you do, he still ends up with the real prize, every time. Isn't that right?"

"Grrrrr." It was true. No matter what Ryoga did, Ranma always ended up with Akane.

The fluttering of the woman's long red hair suddenly caused an angry suspicion to seep into Ryoga's usually dense brain. Red hair. Short. Big breasts. Surely it could only be....

"RANMA! I've had enough of your STUPID disguises!" He grabbed his ever-present kettle of hot water and dumped it all over the woman.

She stayed a woman. A very wet, very ANGRY woman.

WHACK!!!

"You fool! What did you do that for!?" She slapped him again for good measure.

Faced with a beautiful, enraged woman clad in a wet and now nearly transparent gown, Ryoga did what came naturally. He had a nosebleed.

"Uhhh...uhhhh.... It was an honest mistake! Ranma's always trying to trick me by disguising himself.... It's all his fault!"

"Isn't it always?" The woman glared at Ryoga, then waved off his babbled apologies. She suddenly shed her 'mysterious lady' pose and gave him a cold, hard stare. "That's not important now. Let's get down to business."

Ryoga shivered a bit. Now she reminded him unpleasantly of Nabiki Tendo on the prowl for a REAL big deal....

"You want to defeat Ranma Saotome, once and for all. And you want Akane Tendo for yourself, correct?"

Ryoga mutely nodded.

"I want Ranma Saotome punished for his crimes against me."

He blinked and asked, "What did he do to you?"

"That's none of your business. Suffice it to say that I want him to suffer, all right? I want to see him humbled and broken! And the best way to do that is to make sure he's totally humiliated in combat AND also loses his precious fiancée."

"I...I...see."

"There's no way that I can do either of those things myself. However, I can help YOU to do them."

"How?"

"With this." She held up a wide belt in her hands.

"It looks like...."

"...tiger skin, yes. Saotome's strong points is his speed and dexterity. With this belt, the agility and speed of the tiger can be yours. Combine those abilities with your superior strength, and he won't stand a chance."

She smiled wickedly at Ryoga and added, "The belt will also help you in another way. You know about Saotome's little cat problem?"

Ryoga scratched his head. Thought a bit. "Oh yeah, Ranma's always freaking out when he sees a cat. He usually ends up cowering or runs off screaming." He smirked. "It's pretty pathetic, but kinda funny, too."

The woman gave him a sinister smile. "I'm sure it is. Anyway, this belt will give you the aura of a cat. You'll be able to dominate and defeat Ranma completely."

Ryoga hesitated briefly, then suddenly grinned. He could just imagine himself standing triumphant over a battered Ranma. Saotome would be grovelling in abject terror. Akane would be looking on in complete disgust.

He thought dreamily, (Oh, Akane, I'll finally be able to show you what a pathetic coward Ranma really is. He doesn't deserve to be your fiancée.) He then pictured Akane booting Ranma far, far, far away. And then she would rush over to embrace HIM.

Ryoga eagerly grabbed the tiger skin belt and asked, "How does it work?"

"All you have to do is wear it in your next fight with him. Tomorrow morning at the Tendo home."

He blinked. "Why tomorrow morning?"

The red-haired woman smiled grimly. "Oh, didn't you know? Saotome's planning to secretly marry Akane tomorrow."

"HE'S WHAT!?!?! Why...why that miserable, conniving bastard!" Ryoga smashed an innocent nearby tree into splinters. "He probably bullied her into this wedding, too. And I'm sure those two old fools they call 'fathers' helped!" He then turned to face the direction directly opposite of Nerima and prepared to march off that instant in the true 'victory or death' spirit.

The woman whipped out a pail of cold water and dumped it over Ryoga's head. She then pulled P-chan from the pile of loose clothes. Holding him up, she gave him a good shaking.

"Where do you think you're going!? If you try to get to Nerima by yourself, you won't arrive until after the honeymoon's long over. Your precious Akane will probably be two months pregnant by then!"

P-chan went rigid. Blood gushed from his nose as he pictured a naked Ranma and Akane lewdly cavorting in a tacky honeymoon suite.

(NOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!) he silently screamed. Then he fainted.

The woman stared at the limp piglet in mild disgust. "Hmmm. I think I overdid it. I guess the reports weren't exaggerating about Hibiki's hypersensitivity about females." She went to refill her bucket.

P-chan slowly revived after the woman repeatedly dunked him in cold water. He dazedly wondered, (What...what was it...about Akane? Pregnant? That means, she... she and Ranma... they had to... they were... oh, nooooo....) Everything started to go black again.

When the woman saw P-chan passing out again, she smacked him none too gently across the muzzle. "Get a grip on yourself, you idiot! How are you going to help Akane if you keep fainting like that?"

P-chan blinked huge, tear-filled eyes at her, then uttered a pathetic squeal.

The woman sighed. "Now listen to me. It hasn't happened YET. It won't happen IF you do what I say!" She held a braided black and red cord in front of his face. "See this? Tie this around your wrist. It will guide you to wherever Ranma Saotome is. Now, are you prepared to stay awake and listen to my plan?"

The little piglet slowly nodded his head. "Bweeeee...."

[That same night at the Kuno family mansion....]

Kuno awoke to the sound of a soft rustle in his room. He grabbed the bokken lying beside him, then sprang from his bed with a roar.

"Who dares invade the chambers of Tatewaki Kuno, he who is known as

Blue Thunder!?" A distant rumble echoed in the night.

There was a soft, frightened yelp, followed by a long silence. Finally, a meek yet sultry woman's voice whispered, "A lady in dire need of help."

In the moonlight from the open window, Kuno could see the shadowy form of a young woman. She was petite and undeniably gorgeous. Long, red tresses cascaded down to her waist. He blinked and whispered hopefully, "Pig-tailed girl?"

His mysterious visitor sadly shook her head. "No, I am not the woman you love. But I am trying to aid her and others in their quest for freedom."

"Freedom? You... you don't mean... from that foul sorcerer and enslaver of women, Ranma Saotome!?"

The woman nodded, sniffing pathetically. "Just so. I have come to beg your aid! You are my only hope! All others have turned away from the plight of these poor females, content to allow your beloved pig-tailed girl to languish in vile bondage to the dark Saotome -- deprived of her very identity and name!"

She sagged to her knees and uttered a heartbreaking sob. "And what of the brave Akane Tendo, who hates him and curses him for the foul villain he is, yet still cannot free herself from his evil grasp?"

Kuno dropped his bokken and grabbed her hands. "Speak on, fair maiden. Please, how may I help my two loves! I implore you!"

"Saotome..." she shuddered before continuing in a faint whisper. "...is planning to secretly wed Akane Tendo tomorrow morning...."

Kuno froze in shock. Recognizing the signs of an imminent explosion of rage, the woman clung to his hands and hastily tried to finish her little speech.

"...and intends to use both Akane Tendo and the pig-tailed girl immediately thereafter in foul acts beyond description to satisfy his vile lusts...."

"WHAT!?!?!?" Slight flickers of reddish energy began to drift off Kuno's body. "Saotome! You fiend! Not just one but both. And at the same time! I would rend your curst heart from your maggot-riddled flesh before I would allow my loves to suffer such lecherous tortures at your hands! Saotome, prepare to DIEEEEE!!!" He swept up his bokken and lunged for the open window.

The young woman grabbed Kuno with amazing strength and hauled him back into the room. "NO! You must not do it that way, noble sir! Do you not understand? He is the only one who knows where the pig-tailed girl is! If you kill Saotome before the wedding, YOU WILL NEVER SEE YOUR BELOVED PIG-TAILED GIRL AGAIN! She will be bound to the darkness for all eternity!"

Kuno stared at her for a long moment before her words slowly oozed

into his brain. "Say... again...."

Satisfied that Kuno was actually listening to her, the woman relaxed her grip slightly. However, taking no chances, she poked him on a pressure point that left him frozen in place.

"Noble lord, you must challenge the evil Saotome AT the wedding ceremony, not before! Only then will he summon the pig-tailed girl forth from her imprisonment so he may gloat and taunt her with the terrible fate that awaits her."

Kuno gurgled in incoherent rage.

"And for all your great skill, you cannot defeat him unaided!" She held up a tiger skin belt and shoved it into his hands. "The evil Saotome fears cats beyond all reason. Rest assured that this belt will evoke that terrible fear in him. Wear it into battle and he SHALL cringe before your righteous glory like a mindless beast."

Even in his seething fury, Kuno hesitated as he frowned at the belt in his hands. In low, strangled tones, he reluctantly whispered, "But...but a true warrior... does not rely on arcane... trickery to overcome his opponents...."

The woman slowly pulled back from him and sobbed, "So... you ARE no better than any of the others! I thought you were strong enough to do whatever was necessary to save your loves. But I was WRONG! Your pride is more important to you than the women you claim to love so much!" She slapped him hard. "Yes, let them suffer degradation and unspeakable misery at Saotome's hands! What do you care? I hope that you survive your battle with him so that you can see for yourself what you've... you've... wrought with your stupid pride."

She broke off with a heart-wrenching cry, grabbed the belt from Kuno's hands and turned to leave. A step away from the window, she heard Kuno's anguished voice shout, "No! Forgive my momentary weakness! Please, I beg you! You are quite right, Saotome must die by fair means or foul! Nothing else matters!"

As she stood with her back to the still paralyzed Kuno, a bone-chilling grin of satisfaction momentarily touched the woman's lips. The faint grin was instantly replaced by a timid smile as she turned to face him.

She gently touched his reddened cheek where she had struck him and murmured, "Please...please forgive me. It's been such a struggle.... Saotome is so powerful, so vicious.... I had nowhere else to turn and when I thought you didn't care...." She pulled out a delicate silk handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes.

Placing the tiger skin belt back into Kuno's hands, she moved toward the window. "I'm very sorry about your current immobility but I was desperate to keep you from premature action. You will recover full motion in a few hours, my hero. There will be ample time to prepare for your duel. Remember, noble Kuno. At the wedding ceremony at 10 AM at the Tendo dojo and not a moment before. Otherwise, both Akane Tendo and the pig-tailed girl will be lost to you FOREVER!" She then slipped out the window and disappeared like a wisp of smoke.

Kuno forced his fingers to close around the furred belt.
"Yes...yes...tomorrow.... Tomorrow morning, Ranma Saotome! I shall SMITE your filthy presence from this earth! DEATH! DEATH TO RANMA SAOTOME!!!"

In the Tendo house, Ranma sneezed loudly in his sleep.

> Part 1b: Setting the Stage

Early the next morning, Yonoko took up her position in a building near the Tendo home. The room she occupied was an interesting combination of high-tech electronics and ancient magic. Television monitors nestled side-by-side with brittle parchment scrolls and books of arcane lore. Taking advantage of a few free moments, she called one of her surveillance teams to verify the current location of a certain panty-stealing pervert. Fortunately, all signs indicated that the old man would be happily occupied for next few hours.

"Good. But warn me immediately if Happosai heads back toward Nerima."

The sorceress then placed the tools of her art on the table. Two hand-sized cat figurines. A long silver pin. A small straw doll that had a few black hairs and a scrap of bright red cloth sticking out of it. An assortment of magic wards written on paper strips.

Her preparations complete, she turned her eyes to the closed circuit monitor and waited.

At 8 AM, Sasuke went to wake his master. He opened the door to Kuno's bedroom, took a quick peek inside, and cringed. Kuno sat cross-legged on the floor with a tiger-patterned belt around his waist and an unsheathed katana in his lap. The light from the incredibly intense red aura dancing around his body only accentuated the expression of pure hatred and utter determination on Kuno's face.

A young lady in Nerima was putting the finishing touches to her appearance. Finally satisfied, she set off for an eagerly anticipated meeting with the love of her life.

Two other young ladies in Nerima were making similar preparations.

A mature but elegant-looking woman left her house. In her arms, she carried a long, thin bundle.

Following the tug of the braided cord around his wrist, Ryoga soon found himself in the vicinity of Nerima and the Tendo dojo. He patted the tiger skin belt around his waist and cracked his knuckles. "Ranma, victory will be mine at last!"

In a much more dreamy voice, he added, "Oh, Akane, soon Ranma will never be able to hurt you again.... And then, maybe, I'll be able to tell you what's in my poor heart of glass."

The braided cord urged him toward the left. Ryoga eagerly headed in that direction, a decidedly nasty grin of anticipation on his face.

After her usual early morning jog, Akane went upstairs to change her clothes. Instead of entering her room, she wandered over to the small window at the end of the hall. She closed her eyes and luxuriated in the bright morning sunshine and the cool breeze coming through the open window.

"Spring break's been really nice so far. I hope this weather lasts."

Movement below caught her eye. She leaned forward slightly to see Ranma just finishing up an intricate tai chi exercise behind the dojo. He paused to take a few deep breaths, then stepped indoors. He soon emerged with a wooden staff. He stood still a moment with his eyes closed, then began a slow and elegant kata with the staff.

As Akane watched his graceful movements, she recalled the first time she had ever seen him performing something so slow or formal. It had been quite a surprise -- and a revelation -- to her. With Ranma's usual impatience and his incredible competitive streak, tai chi or stylized forms didn't seem to fit him at all.

However, she had eventually realized just how important these things were to him. Like the times he spent alone on the roof or under his favorite bridge, those techniques were his refuge, a small island of calm in a hectic life. When something really bothered him or after particularly bitter arguments, Ranma could often be found quietly working through a series of complicated kata.

He paused briefly to hold a crane stance before flowing into another complicated series of staff strikes.

(So what's bothering him now? Ranma and I haven't had any really serious fights for a while. Well, except for the usual stuff about my cooking or P-chan but even those have been pretty minor.)

She frowned slightly. At first, the fighting and bickering had been an easy, comfortable way of keeping Ranma at a distance. But the constant arguing had gotten old and tiring. A lot of times, she ended up feeling a bit guilty for over-reacting. The guilt only made Akane more annoyed at him, which made them fight even more. And so it went, on and on.

But suddenly things changed.

Her thoughts drifted back to the events of that fall, as it had so many times before. Back to that single, unforgettable moment on Mount Phoenix....

He had wanted to tell her that he loved her. When he thought she was dead, Ranma cried and actually said that he loved her.

Her hand tightened on the windowsill.

(If Ryoga and the others hadn't shown up and completely broken the mood, I would have.... Oh, I don't know WHAT I would have done. But I didn't even get the chance!)

And ever since the return to Nerima, the idiot had acted as if the whole confession had never happened. Whenever she tried to talk about it, Ranma always managed to avoid the topic somehow -- either by making her mad or by running off.

(But... at least he hasn't DENIED saying it. I guess that's something.)

Akane sighed wistfully. On a couple of occasions, she could have sworn that Ranma had been just about to admit his feelings to her. However, something had always interfered.

(Someone's always butting in! His fiancées, the other guys, our parents, just to name a few! How do they expect us to make any decisions if they never leave us alone long enough to figure this mess out?)

Of course, things weren't perfect. They still argued a lot. He still called her a violent tomboy. And he just would NOT quit with the stupid remarks about her cooking. The window sill creaked under her white-knuckled grip and she forced herself to relax before she tore it out of the wall.

(But I've got to admit that he's really been trying to be nice to me.) It had taken some time but it finally occurred to her that Ranma had stopped using those annoying 'uncute' and 'unsexy' insults of his.

Akane stared pensively down at her hands. In a way, she had always hated those insults most of all and now... now she wasn't sure what to make of their absence.

(Does that mean that Ranma's starting to find me... cute?) She felt herself blush at the prospect of being Ranma's 'cute fiancée'.

(...instead of Ukyo....)

Her gaze returned almost involuntarily to Ranma. She couldn't help admiring how his body carried him effortlessly and precisely through every movement. She never would have admitted it aloud but the annoying boy/girl who had arrived at the Tendos' house, slung over a panda's shoulder, had definitely changed. A lot. Nearly two years of growth, combined with constant fighting and training, had given Ranma a special combination of strength, skill, and grace that no other martial artist could match.

Akane sighed quietly. She couldn't deny that Ranma was good-looking, maybe even... handsome.

A creak of a stair startled her, then she heard Kasumi's voice from downstairs.

"Father, didn't the message say that you're supposed to meet Councilman Motatsu at 10 o'clock?"

On the stairway, Soun Tendo replied, "Oh no! I completely forgot that he wanted to discuss the panty thefts ... again! Arrgghh! Saotome, you aren't leaving me alone to deal with this! He's your master, too!" There was the sound of rapidly receding footsteps.

Kasumi called up the stairs. "Akane?"

"Yes, Kasumi?"

"I'm going out to do some shopping. Do you want anything?"

"No. Thanks, anyway."

Akane walked back to the stairs. She saw her father dash out the door, dragging a VERY reluctant Mr. Saotome along. Kasumi gave her a little wave and followed them out in a much more sedate fashion.

She breathed a faint sigh of relief. The last thing she wanted was to have her father catch his daughter spying on Ranma. It might give him the stupid idea that she was 'drooling' over her fiance.

Akane grimaced. (That makes me sound like Kodachi. Ick!)

(Truthfully, Dad and Mr. Saotome happily would use the smallest excuse to drag us in front of the altar. Again.)

She flushed but this time it was with anger. She remembered the first try at a Saotome-Tendo wedding all too well. Her father and Mr. Saotome, in their infinite wisdom, had decided to hold a secret wedding right after Mount Phoenix.

It had been an indescribable disaster.

(Secret wedding, what a joke! That wedding must have been the most publicized SECRET in the history of Nerima! It's a miracle that Ranma and I managed to survive all the trouble those stupid wedding plans caused. And in Ranma's case, it was WAY too close.... I'd never seen Dr. Tofu so mad!)

However, in spite of all the turmoil, nothing had really changed for the two of them. He STILL had two extra fiancées. Kodachi was STILL after him. Ryoga, Kuno, and Mousse were STILL constantly fighting with him for all sorts of crazy reasons.

(Unless something really major happens, a wedding's totally out of the question right now. Even eloping wouldn't help. The same mess would still be waiting for us....) Her thoughts ground to a sudden halt.

(Why am I thinking about weddings? I'm in no rush to get married! Let's face it, Ranma's no prize! He's rude and insensitive. He's such a troublemaker. He makes P-chan's table manners look good. And he's always letting those other girls hang all over him!)

But Akane's anger soon fizzed out. Ranma had a few good points. He took his honor very seriously. He didn't hold grudges. He didn't like hurting people. He'd help almost anybody -- it didn't matter if the person had tried to kill him or if the person was a nasty pervert like Happosai. He did NOT give up.

And Akane KNEW that Ranma could be remarkably kind.

(Okay, so he's got a lot of good points....)

"Which makes the times when he acts like a stupid, arrogant jerk even more infuriating! What's wrong with him?" She flung up her hands. "Is he TRYING to drive me crazy!?"

There was one last thing about Ranma that always lingered in Akane's mind, even in her most angry moments. She didn't exactly know what to call it but deep in her heart, she knew how rare it was.

Supporting her, protecting her, fighting for her -- whatever it took, whenever she had needed him, Ranma had always been there for her....

And what had she ever done to deserve that?

Akane's musings were interrupted by a knock on the front door.

Behind the dojo, Ranma steadily worked his way through the complicated kata, letting the rhythm of the movements calm his mind.

Block. Feint. Block. Strike. Parry.

It had taken a lot of yelling and more than one battle, but he had managed to get his father off his back for a few days.

(I really needed the time to think about a few things.)

His eighteenth birthday was coming up in a couple of weeks. Senior year was fast approaching. And although he would have died before admitting it, he dreaded the thought of going through another year of total craziness -- the craziness that passed for his life in Nerima. However, it was the stupid mess involving Ukyo, Shampoo, and Kodachi that really bothered him.

(It's a no-win situation. If things don't change, somebody's going to get seriously hurt. And if things do change, somebody's STILL going to get hurt!) He bit his lip. (And I'm not just talking about hurt feelings!)

Ranma wasn't too worried for himself. He really worried about Akane, though. Shampoo and Kodachi had already gone after her in a serious way more than once. And Ukyo... well, Ukyo was a dear friend but a

girl who dedicated over ten years of her life to revenge wasn't exactly the forgiving type.

He reluctantly admitted to himself that he couldn't put anything pass Ukyo. It had been a shock to find out that she had been one of the many people dosing him with weird magic potions after the news of his and Akane's 'secret' wedding hit the streets of Nerima. He EXPECTED Shampoo and Kodachi to try sneaky tricks like love potions. But Ukyo? Ranma had always considered her to be 'safe'. It had hurt to find out differently....

He put too much force into his next strike and nearly botched the next move.

(Gotta calm down. Focus....)

Ranma couldn't exactly remember when he had decided that the only fiancée he wanted -- that he had ever wanted -- was Akane.

(I mean, we argue a lot. She clobbers me for no reason. She blames me for stuff that ain't my fault. She hardly ever listens to me. She calls me a pervert....)

He broke his form long enough to sigh deeply.

(But when we're not fighting... When we're working together... When she's laughing or smiling... It just feels SO right.)

(And how does Akane feel about me? Does she...really care? She's gotten herself into real danger helping me....)

(...but she's the type who would do it for just about anybody. She'd probably do the same thing for a stray dog,) a cynical inner voice countered.

(And I've kinda got the feeling that she's been trying to control that crazy temper of hers....)

(...or are you just getting used to her pounding and yelling at you all the time?) Ranma's cynical side snidely asked.

(Care.... No, that's not the right question. It's all about... love. Does she LOVE me?)

(...how can she love you when your own mother...,) his inner voice whispered nastily before Ranma brutally squelched that train of thought.

He sighed again and muttered, "But it really doesn't matter how Akane feels, does it?"

He wanted...no, NEEDED to protect Akane. He really hated to hurt her in any way. He missed her when she wasn't around. And he simply could NOT tolerate even the possibility of losing her. Ranma's thoughts skittered wildly away from those horrible moments at Mount Phoenix when Akane had been lying there so still in his arms.... He shook his head violently.

(Enough about Akane! She's not the problem here. It was the other three that I've gotta to worry about...especially Ukyo. What am I

gonna do about Ukyo?)

Akane opened the door to see Mrs. Saotome standing on the porch, her ever-present katana on her arms. She sometimes wondered why Mrs. Saotome persisted in carrying the sword around. After all, she'd already decided that Ranma was 'manly', even with his Jusenkyo curse.

"Auntie Saotome!" Akane greeted her cheerfully.

Nodoka smiled at her. "Hello, Akane. Where are Ranma and my husband?"

"Uh, Ranma? He's still doing his morning workout. I think Mr. Saotome went out with my father to some sort of meeting."

Nodoka pulled out a note. "How very strange. Ranma should have been expecting me. After all, he's the one who asked me to come here for a formal meeting."

"Meeting?"

"Regarding his engagement."

"Engagement?" Akane felt a strong twinge of anger. (Why didn't that jerk mention anything to me? I'm his fiancée!)

At that moment, Ukyo arrived at the Tendos' front door. She had obviously taken great care in dressing that morning. Unlike her usual masculine garb, the chef wore a nicely tailored dress and high heels.

"Mrs. Saotome! I hope I'm not too early."

Nodoka looked startled. "Early? For what?"

"For our meeting, right? Ranma sent me a message saying that you wanted to discuss our engagement."

"But Ukyo, I didn't ask Ranma to send you any such message."

"But...." Looking around in confusion, Ukyo noticed Akane standing in the doorway in her T-shirt and shorts. "Uh, what are you doing here?"

Akane acidly replied, "I LIVE here, remember?"

Shampoo stalked through the front gate. For once, she was wearing a tasteful silk dress -- one that didn't look as if it had been painted on her body.

Akane scowled. (Oh great. Now Shampoo.)

"What is Akane and stupid spatula girl doing here? This suppose to be private meeting with mother-in-law."

"Now wait a minute, you Chinese hussy...."

"Who you call hussy, spatula girl!?"

"Ho ho ho ho ho!" A familiar eerie laugh filled the air. A few black rose petals drifted in the breeze as Kodachi regally strolled into the Tendo compound. She gave Mrs. Saotome an elegant bow.

"Mrs. Saotome, it's such a pleasure to see you again! Our last meeting was so brief but I'm sure you remember me, Kodachi Kuno, otherwise known as the Black Rose of St. Hebereke High School." She uttered a coy giggle. "I'm so glad to finally have the opportunity to become better acquainted with the gracious mother of my darling, darling Ranma."

She then noticed Ukyo, Shampoo, and Akane who were all angrily staring at her. "What are you little tarts doing here? How dare you intrude on a private meeting?"

Akane gritted her teeth. "As I said before, I LIVE here."

"Hey! It's a private meeting, all right, but it's MY meeting, not yours! Butt out!"

Kodachi whipped out a piece of paper. "My darling Ranma specifically asked me to come here to meet his mother and discuss our engagement!"

Ukyo yanked out a piece of paper of her own and snarled, "Well, I've got one too!"

Akane marched out the house and confronted Kodachi, "And what do you mean by 'our engagement'?"

"Husband send message that he want Shampoo to meet his mother." The Amazon scowled angrily at a now familiar-looking piece of stationary.

In unison, Kodachi, Ukyo, and Akane turned on Shampoo and shouted, "HE'S NOT YOUR HUSBAND!"

"Yes he is! Amazon law say so!"

"Do you want to know where you can stick your Amazon law!?" Ukyo snapped.

"There's no way I will allow some half-witted barbarian harlot to lay claim to my dear Ranma!"

"Spatula girl and crazy girl want to fight for Ranma, they got it!" Shampoo smirked and went into a combat stance.

Ukyo pulled out her throwing spatulas. "You asked for it, you bimbo!"

With her ribbon twirling, Kodachi giggled and said, "Nobody crosses the Black Rose! Suffer and learn, fools!"

Nodoka coughed and firmly said, "Excuse me, girls. Why don't we try to settle this in a more lady-like fashion?" Akane quietly fumed in the background as the other three women instantly assumed a more

demure attitude.

"Sorry, Mrs. Saotome..."

"Please forgive my unseemly behavior...."

"Shampoo apologize...."

"Now, girls, about those notes...?"

Back at the Neko-hanten, an irate Muu-muu was clutching a throwing knife in his bill. He'd just spent the past hour struggling to loosen the latch on his cage. Before departing for the Tendo dojo, Shampoo had taken the precaution of locking him up to prevent interference. However, Muu-muu had no intention of letting his beloved Shampoo sneak off to some sort of secret meeting with Ranma.

(I don't know what you're up to, Saotome, but I'm not going to let you touch Shampoo!)

The latch gradually started to move....

Just as he had completed the kata, Ranma heard a faint commotion near the front of the house. Naturally curious, he decided to investigate. Ranma had no idea of the trouble awaiting him. Then again, his usually fine-tuned sense of danger never had much luck with his fiancées.

He carelessly jogged around the dojo and hopped up onto the walkway fence, only to freeze in surprise when he saw his four fiancées -- both real and self-appointed. The girls were engaged in a fierce but excruciatingly polite argument while his mother looked on, a slight frown on her face. Ranma felt chills run down his spine as they all turned to stare up at him.

(Oh great! All the problem women in my life. Mom included.)

His instincts told him to run for it. He actually took a step back when Nodoka caught sight of him and said, "Ranma, could you come here for a moment?"

He sighed, straightened his shoulders, and hopped down off the fence. (Why do I have the feeling that things are about to get REALLY ugly?)

His mother gave her son a stern look and thrust several pieces of paper at him. "Can you please explain these notes?"

He stared at the four messages. They were all basically the same, each inviting the addressee to a 10 AM meeting at the Tendo house to discuss the matter of his engagement. He looked up to see everyone, especially Akane, glaring furiously at him.

He held his hands up as if trying to fend a physical assault. "Hey! Don't look at me! I didn't have anything to do with this!"

"Ranma honey, you'd better be telling the truth or else you're going to get HURT."

"Husband no lie about this?"

"Darling! How could you have possibly forgotten such an important event?"

"Ranma, are you... absolutely sure?" his mother asked in a firm voice as she absently picked at the strings holding the wrappings on her sword. Akane saw him flinch at his mother's question.

He stared at his mother for a long moment. With surprising surge of bitterness, he thought, (Why is Mom on my case so much? What did I do to make her believe that I'd lie about something this serious? I'm not like Pop!)

After his mother had learned about and accepted his Jusenkyo curse, he had been so happy... for a while. Then it had started....

(And I thought it was bad when I was pretending to be Ranko! She pounces on every little thing that she considers 'unmanly' or dishonorable. The slightest mistake, the smallest slip-up.... It's like she's LOOKING for an excuse to change her mind and use that stupid sword of hers!)

Things had only gotten worse after his mother's house had been rebuilt after it had been nearly being destroyed by his rampaging fiancées. His mother had moved out of the Tendos' home immediately after the house was finished. Ranma and his father had not. It didn't take a mind-reader to figure out that his mom had NOT been pleased.

In response to his mother's question, Ranma leaned forward slightly and said very emphatically, "Yeah, I'm sure. I didn't write those notes and I don't know anything about them. OKAY?" It was bordering on outright rudeness but he couldn't help it. He had enough trouble just trying to hide his hurt feelings.

Suddenly, behind him, Ranma heard an all too familiar voice yelling, "SAO-TO-ME!!!!"

> Part 1c: Murder, Madness, & Mayhem

Ranma spun around to face Kuno. The upperclassman stood in the gateway, literally glowing with rage. The steel blade of his unsheathed katana glittered in the sunlight.

Eyes widening in surprise, Ranma thought, (Oh man, he looks totally pissed off! I've NEVER seen Kuno this mad before. He really means business, this time. That's no wooden bokken he's waving around!)

"Saotome, today you die. You have tormented Akane Tendo and the pig-tailed girl for too long. Your evil reign ends now!" Kuno

proclaimed in fearsomely solemn tones. In other circumstances, Kuno's pompous little speech would have been rather funny. But something about Kuno's attitude took all the humor out of his words.

With his customary bravado, Ranma snapped, "Man, are you're still going on about that? Well, I'm ready for anything you can dish out!"

(Just great. All my fiancees are ready to pound me, my mom thinks I'm a liar, and Kuno's out for blood. What else can go....)

"Ranma, prepare to DIE!" For once, Ryoga didn't land on top of Kuno as he jumped over the wall.

(...wrong? Shit! WHEN will I learn to stop asking stupid questions like that?)

"What now, Ryoga!? Didn't suffer enough yesterday, pig boy?"

"Shut up, Ranma! What you do to me is one thing, but there's no WAY that I'm going to let you force Akane into another damn wedding!"

At the same time, Kuno shouted, "I forbid it! Do you hear me, Saotome? I ABSOLUTELY forbid it! How dare you defile the sacred rite of matrimony to gratify your base lusts!"

Ranma blinked, then blurted out, "Wedding!? Matrimony!?"

The four fiancees and his mother said in ominous tones, "RRANMMAA!!!!"

Ranma turned around to face the angry women. "Hey, don't look at me! I DON'T KNOW NOTHING ABOUT NO WEDDING!!!"

He snarled to himself, (Pop, if this was one of your stupid ideas, I'm gonna kill you!)

In her hiding place, Yonoko held a hand over each cat figurine and softly whispered a single word.

The skin on the back of Ranma's neck prickled -- a sure sign of danger. He cursed himself for taking his attention off Kuno and Ryoga for even a second. Ranma immediately spun back around to face them. He took an belligerent step forward and said, "Okay, that's it! I've had enough of both of you and your stupid challenges! Which of you guys wants to be the first to get trashed?"

(Come on, come on. Go for it. If I can get these guys arguing as usual....)

Kuno and Ryoga didn't even bother to look at each other, but instead took a simultaneous step forward. Ranma frowned and readied himself for their joint attack.

Yonoko took a firm grip on the long silver pin. She suddenly stabbed downward, pinning two of the magic wards to the straw doll with a single, vicious stroke.

Ranma abruptly clutched his head as a storm of sickening cat-related images tore through his mind.

"AGGGHHHH!"

As he stared at Kuno and Ryoga, a horribly familiar sensation of pure terror flooded his body. There was something WRONG about them -- their posture, their movements, everything.... He slowly began to back away. A bead of sweat trickled down the side of Ranma's face and he started to make soft, whimpering noises. Kuno and Ryoga both looked grimly satisfied with Ranma's reaction as they continued their menacing approach.

"C-c-caa...caaaa...caaaatt...."

His sudden cry, followed by Ranma's obvious state of terror, jolted Akane and the other fiancées out of their anger.

"Ran-chan? What's wrong?" Ukyo asked in bewilderment.

"A cat? Huh?" Akane quickly scanned the area. Finding nothing, she shook her head in bewilderment. "Ranma, get a grip on yourself! There are no cats here!"

He lifted a badly shaking hand and pointed in Kuno and Ryoga's direction. Ryoga simply smirked while Kuno grinned in savage pleasure. The upperclassman gloated, "That's right, writhe in fear, you craven worm!"

Nodoka frowned at what she considered a blatant display of cowardice. In sharp, scolding tones, she said, "Ranma! This is most unseemly behavior for a martial artist!"

"C-c-c-cattt...." Ranma seemed incapable of saying anything else as horrifying memories -- memories of glowing, hungry eyes, of sharp teeth and sharper claws -- completely took control of both mind and senses.

Yonoko watched the scene unfolding in the Tendo compound and smiled in somewhat malicious amusement. Two years of careful observation had given her the opportunity to pinpoint Saotome's every strength and weakness. Now all that effort would pay off.

Leaving the straw doll to do its dark work, she lifted her hands. In response to her gestures, wisps of arcane energy began to swirl around each of the cat figurines on the table.

As the women watched in utter disbelief, Ryoga and Kuno suddenly collapsed to the ground, writhing and screaming. Their bodies started

to warp and swell. Clothes split away from bulging muscles. Bare skin sprouted fur. Their faces lengthened into muzzles full of long, gleaming teeth. Human limbs became paws tipped with knife-like claws. The screams deepened into low, bestial roars.

The transformations were appallingly quick. Within a few seconds, Kuno was now a huge blue tiger with black markings while Ryoga had changed into a slightly smaller, but more heavily built, yellow and black tiger. Their eyes seemed to glow with an eerie green fire. Saliva dripped from their gaping jaws as they slowly stalked forward.

A strangled scream tore its way out of Ranma's throat as he frantically scrambled backward until he was cowering up against his fiancées and his mother. It was if his worst fears had been spun into material form, then magnified a hundredfold. The cats were coming for HIM and he knew it.

"No no nononono...!"

The blue tiger uttered a vicious, hissing snarl. At the sound, Ranma cried out in pain before abruptly collapsing onto the porch. As Akane knelt down and held his shoulders, Nodoka frantically asked, "What's wrong with him?"

"I...I don't know!"

Akane frantically thought, (I know Ranma's afraid of cats but this.... Something's terribly wrong about all this! What's going on!?) She could see him flinch with every snarl or growl the tigers made. As she watched helplessly, he curled up into a tight ball, covering his ears with his hands in an effort to shut out the sounds of the tigers.

"S-s-stop... get off...leave me alone...stop...hurts...!"

Ukyo shivered as she heard Ranma's low whimpers and moans of anguish. She then glared furiously at the tigers.

"Leave him alone, you damn monsters! HIYAA!" She leapt forward and hurled a handful of her razor-sharp throwing spatulas directly at the tigers.

The spatulas simply bounced off the creatures' thick fur.

As Ukyo swore in frustration, Kodachi knocked her aside and snapped, "Stupid wench, get out of my way!"

"Hey! Watch it!" Ukyo frantically ducked as the metal-edged ribbon whipped through the air just above her head. Kodachi's weapon struck the blue tiger. That beast had been her brother Tatewaki just a few minutes before, but ties of blood had never stopped the Kuno siblings from attempting to inflict severe bodily harm on each other. Ukyo could tell that Kodachi was not holding anything back. However, despite Kodachi's best efforts, the slashing ribbon had just as little effect as Ukyo's spatulas.

The tigers ignored the girls' futile attacks. Their attention was clearly focused on Ranma alone.

Shampoo yanked one of her hair ornaments loose and threw it with all her Amazon strength at the blue tiger's head. The ornament sank deep into the eye socket, causing the tiger to roar in pain -- a sound that made Ranma cringe even more.

Her shout of triumph faded into a hiss of dismay as Shampoo watched the ornament pop loose, and the tiger's eye heal almost instantly. The blue tiger then resumed its leisurely but inexorable advance, just a step behind its companion.

Ukyo started to back away from the tigers. In a tense voice, she said, "I think we're in big trouble." She then glared briefly at Shampoo. "Where are those damn maces you're always waving around?"

"Stupid spatula girl! Shampoo here for private talk, not duel! Not polite to carry big weapon around even if talk is with mother-in-law!" The Amazon was also retreating. "Shampoo ask same thing about you and stupid big spatula!"

Ukyo muttered to herself, "What a great time for both of us to pick up some manners. I should know better after hanging around Ran-chan all this time!"

The exact same thought ran through both Ukyo's and Shampoo's minds. (And I'm NEVER going to get caught unarmed like this again. NEVER! I don't care what that stupid book on etiquette says!)

Ukyo then said in a much more conciliatory voice, "What do you say to a... uh, strategic retreat?" She pointed over her shoulder toward the front door of the Tendo house.

Shampoo nodded abruptly. "We no can fight monsters unarmed. When inside, head for dojo and grab weapons."

"Gotcha."

Kodachi joined the two of them in their slow retreat. "I'm quite in accordance. What are you fools waiting for?"

The directional microphones picked up the girls' conversation perfectly. Yonoko murmured, "Now, now... I can't have you running off prematurely, ladies."

She closed her eyes and chanted briefly. A small transparent cube appeared between her hands. Yonoko suddenly clapped her hands together and the cube vanished in a flash of light.

Akane had come up with the same idea as Ukyo and Shampoo. Leaving Ranma in his mother's hands, she started to struggle with the front door. Ukyo moved up behind her and tensely asked, "Akane, what's the holdup? We've got to get away from those things!"

Akane snarled, "I'm trying! The door won't open!"

"What do you mean, it won't open?" Ukyo jerked the door handle but

the front door refused to move. "Damn! Shampoo!"

Shampoo dragged her gaze away from the stalking beasts. "What now?"

"See if you can get this door open!"

"Violent girl pick fine time to lock us out of house!"

"It's not locked! It just won't open!" Akane protested.

"Stupid Akane!" The Amazon yanked, then pounded on the door. It refused to budge no matter how hard she tried.

Akane bit her lip. (With Shampoo's strength, she could easily smash a hole right through the wall. She's done it plenty of times before. This stupid front door should be no problem!)

"Is no good!"

"What's going on here?" Kodachi hissed anxiously.

"Maybe we can just edge along the wall...." Ukyo tried to step off the right side of the porch but found a very unpleasant surprise.

"Shit! There's something blocking the way!" Ukyo pounded her fists on an invisible wall at the edge of the porch.

"What!?" Akane tried the other side of the porch and found the same sort of invisible barrier.

Shampoo looked upward, a grim expression on her face. She pulled her other hair ornament free and flung it straight up. Instead of punching through the roof of the porch, it ricocheted in mid-air and landed at her feet. The girls soon found out that the front edge of the porch -- the side closest to the approaching tigers -- was the only side not blocked off by invisible barriers.

"We're trapped but good!" Ukyo growled.

Shampoo bent down to gently touch Ranma's quivering body, then looked up at Akane in confusion. "Why he no change? Why no Cat-fist?"

"I don't know!" Akane pointed at the tigers. "But I'm guessing that whatever changed Ryoga and Kuno also has something to do with Ranma's condition."

Yonoko glanced at the two magic wards pinned to the straw doll. The first one was a straightforward fear spell. Its purpose was obvious and simple. The second magic ward was originally intended to prevent insanity. However, this time, its sole purpose was to prevent Saotome from escaping into his cat-personality prematurely. Only after his terror become truly and utterly unbearable would he be able to escape into the Neko-ken.

The cruel elegance of the spell, the subtle twisting of a protective object into an excruciatingly painful weapon -- those were the

signatures of Ebon's handiwork.

....as Saotome would soon learn for himself.

By now, everyone huddled together on the front porch, boxed in with nowhere to go. The tigers, now only six or seven meters away, completely blocked the only path of escape. With a grim expression on her face, Nodoka stood up, unsheathed her sword, and advanced forward. However, before she could step off the porch, Shampoo put her hand on Nodoka's wrist and brought her to a stop.

"Please, is better for Shampoo to fight. Shampoo is Amazon warrior."

Nodoka frowned. "Child, it's my duty to...."

"Shampoo has duty, too, to protect husband." For once, the other fiancées chose not to argue with her. While Nodoka hesitated, the Amazon girl urgently added, "Also, Shampoo best fighter here. Is only one strong enough to hurt monsters." It was no idle boast, but just a simple statement of fact.

Nodoka looked at her, then glanced at the other girls and the unconscious Ranma. Then Ranma's mother silently offered Shampoo the Saotome family sword.

The Amazon looked a little startled but then gave Nodoka a quick bow before taking the weapon. As Shampoo tested the sword's superb balance, Kodachi angrily hissed, "Why you conniving little tramp!"

Shampoo gave Kodachi a chilly stare of contempt, then ignored her as she spoke to Akane and Ukyo. "Move Ranma when Shampoo attack."

Akane said, "You can't! Kuno and Ryoga... remember what happened earlier! Those creatures aren't normal animals. That sword isn't going to stop them!"

"Heh." Shampoo tossed her head. "Shampoo not stupid. Shampoo distract tigers, not fight. Beside, no one else good enough or strong enough to do job."

"Damn it! You may be a pretty good fighter but even you won't last five seconds against those things!" Ukyo argued.

"Then it is honorable way to die, yes? Just make sure you no mess up your part."

The eyes of the three girls met in unspoken agreement. Ukyo and Akane moved next to Ranma. Shampoo took a deep breath, then stepped off the porch to confront the tigers.

The creatures' musky scent, the rasp of their claws on the paving stones, their hungry noises -- everything about the monsters plunged Ranma deeper and deeper into an old, pain-wracked nightmare. But this

time, there seemed to be no escape. There was no comforting oblivion to take away the fear that was slowly devouring both mind and soul.

He could sense them moving closer and closer. They were coming for him...and for her. Amid the overwhelming terror and pain that held his mind in a steely grip, Ranma began to feel a fierce, burning rage. He would be DAMNED before he would let anyone or anything take away what he had wanted... and needed... for so long. A home, a sense of belonging... and her.

For the first time in his life, he didn't try to escape or run away from the fear. Instead, Ranma willingly reached into the nightmare and embraced it, searching for the power to keep what was his and his alone.

Yonoko watched without surprise as the paper wards pinned to the straw doll suddenly fluttered. Their movements soon became more and more violent. Suddenly, the wards and the straw doll went up in a bright flash of flame. Only a small puddle of molten silver and flecks of black ash remained.

"Now comes the interesting part."

Akane, Ukyo, and Nodoka gasped as Ranma suddenly rolled to his hands and knees. His lowered head and his hair hid the expression in his eyes but Akane could hear the low, throbbing growl coming from his throat. Hands curled as he pulled his bare feet under him in a familiar stance. The low growl increased in volume to become a deep roar of challenge.

Shampoo whirled around at the sound, then flung herself aside as Ranma leapt off the porch. He landed on the walkway only a few feet away from the two strange males. They dared to take what was HIS.

They would die for it.

He bared his teeth and hissed viciously, one hand raking at the air. In response, the tigers laid back their ears and snarled back.

Akane shuddered. She had seen Ranma in the Neko-ken before, but she had never seen him quite like this. On past occasions, he had certainly been ferocious, but it had always been -- or had quickly become -- a playful sort of ferocity. This time, it was brutally obvious that Ranma was NOT feeling the least bit playful.

This time, if Ranma was feeling anything, it was primal rage.

Nodoka grasped Akane's shoulder in a white-knuckled grip and said in a strangled voice, "What's wrong? Why is Ranma acting like... like some sort of animal?"

Ukyo gulped and sounded a bit sick. "Is THAT the... Neko-ken?"

Akane nodded distractedly. "Yes... I think."

"What the hell do you mean by that!?"

Ranma's mother demanded, "What are you talking about?"

Without looking away from Ranma, Akane hastily explained. "Ranma has a terrible phobia of cats, all because some crazy martial arts training his father put him through. When his fear of cats becomes overwhelming, he starts acting like a cat. He also uses this extremely dangerous martial art called the Neko-ken. It's also known as the Cat-fist."

She paused, then added softly, "But something's wrong this time."

Shampoo murmured. "Shampoo notice it too. Ranma-cat different this time. Much darker, nastier...."

The women watched in horrified fascination as Ranma and the tigers slowly circled each other. The opponents watched each other with predatory intensity, searching for any signs of weakness.

Akane and Shampoo hurriedly grabbed Ukyo as she tried to step forward. She said, "Let me go! We've got to help him. He can't handle those two huge monsters by himself!"

It seemed to be a sadly uneven battle -- a single human against two tigers who each easily outweighed Ranma by four to five times. However, both Akane and Shampoo knew that mere physical size was not the deciding factor in a fight like this.

Akane frantically shook her head. "NO! It's way too dangerous!"

Ukyo snarled, "Hey, Akane! If you're SCARED...."

Akane snapped, "Yes, I AM scared! For you! Do you have ANY idea what a Neko-ken strike can do? In this state, Ranma can rip through steel and rock like paper! Can you imagine what even an accidental blow would do to a human body!?"

"Ranma would never...!"

"No, of course he wouldn't if he was in his right mind. But he's NOT! Ranma's gone berserk with rage right now. There's no telling what he will or won't do. And who knows what's going on with Kuno and Ryoga! If Shampoo didn't stand a chance against them with a sword, what's going to happen to you?"

"Akane right! Best stay out of way...unless spatula girl WANT to end up like chopped cabbage!"

The blue tiger that had once been Tatewaki Kuno attacked first. It lunged for Ranma's throat. Ranma leapt aside effortlessly and slashed back. His hand never touched his opponent, but a huge gash opened along the blue tiger's belly. Any normal animal would have been instantly gutted. However, before the women's horrified eyes, the

near bloodless wound closed and faded away.

The other tiger, formerly Ryoga, moved in with unnatural speed. Ranma jumped over it, then used the Neko-ken to shred mercilessly at the yellow tiger's exposed back. The huge beast howled in pain but the enormous wounds again quickly disappeared.

The pattern repeated itself, time and again. Ranma and the tigers engaged in an incredibly swift and lethal dance. Ranma used his superior speed and agility to maximum advantage. He constantly dodged in and out, using the Neko-ken to slash and tear relentlessly at his opponents as he evaded their attempts to use their superior mass to grapple to bring him down.

In spite of repeatedly hitting his opponents, Ranma's attacks ultimately had no effect. Any wounds suffered by the tigers healed instantly, no matter how severe.

Dragging her eyes away from the battle, Akane took a hasty look around her. Strangely, Shampoo had a somewhat wistful and pensive expression on her face, as if she was perceiving something both undesired but also undeniable. Nodoka was grimly stoic. Ukyo looked horrified at what she saw. And Kodachi....

Totally fixated on Ranma's every movement, Kodachi was almost panting with sheer excitement.

Akane shuddered. She couldn't even begin to guess what was on the gymnast's mind.

Yonoko was sweating but she was nowhere near her limits. No matter how much physical damage Saotome inflicted, she could easily maintain the regeneration spell on the tigers. That spell was the only thing keeping them intact and functioning in the face of his ferocious Neko-ken attacks.

However, the ability to rip through most physical objects actually represented only a fraction of the Neko-ken's power. And in this fight, that minor ability would not be nearly enough. Only the true power of the Neko-ken would win this battle. She and Ebon had made very sure of that. If Saotome couldn't access and master the true Neko-ken, the two tigers would eventually kill him and everyone else at the Tendo home.

She shrugged. In that case, Saotome's death would be small loss. A powerful entity such as Ebon of the Shadows had no use for failures.

However, if Saotome succeeded in using the greater Neko-ken, he would then become much more valuable. And much more useful.

The deadlock in the fight suddenly broke. The two tigers launched a concerted attack that finally allowed them to get a grip on their elusive opponent. The yellow tiger hooked its claws into Ranma's left shoulder as the blue tiger sank its fangs deep into his right hip.

They started to yank in opposite directions in an effort to tear Ranma apart. Literally.

"NO!" Akane took an involuntary step forward. Shampoo let loose a stream of Chinese obscenities.

Screaming in both rage and pain, Ranma managed to pull free. But his freedom did not come cheap. He ended up badly aggravating his injuries as he tore himself away from his opponents. Gasping for air, he managed to put some distance between himself and the tigers. But they had no intention of giving him any time to recover. Even as he licked at his wounds, they moved in for the kill.

Ukyo couldn't take it anymore. "That does it! I don't care HOW dangerous it is to butt in on this cat fight!"

As the tigers drew blood, Yonoko stiffened in anticipation but nothing else happened. She frowned, then snapped her fingers. How careless of her. She had forgotten one very important thing about Saotome.

It was danger to OTHERS, not himself, which often brought out the very best in Ranma Saotome.

(So let's give him four good reasons to push himself a little harder.)

The yellow tiger suddenly abandoned the battle with Ranma. It seemed to have new prey on its mind. It turned and headed directly for Akane and the others.

Ukyo swore bitterly. "Shit! I guess it's now our turn."

Shampoo readied Nodoka's sword while Ukyo pulled out the last of her throwing spatulas. Akane gave the door one last hopeless heave, then took up a defensive stance in front of Nodoka. Shampoo had to shove a bemused Kodachi out of her way as the girls spread out on the porch, trying to give each other fighting room.

As the tigers advanced, Akane shouted, "Ryoga, stop it! RYOGA!"

Her earlier shouts during the fighting had been ignored, but this time, her words actually managed to reach the yellow tiger. It suddenly froze in mid-step. The greenish glow slowly faded from the tiger's eyes.

Ukyo took a startled breath. She whispered, "Come on, Akane! Keep talking!"

Akane nodded. "Ryoga. Fight it! I know you can! You can beat it. Please!"

The tiger stared at Akane, shifting its weight back and forth, as if struggling to decide whether to move forward or retreat. It uttered a low growl of confusion.

Yonoko frowned slightly but she seemed more wistful than displeased by the yellow beast's reluctance.

"That Tendo girl's very lucky to have not one, but TWO young men so deeply in love with her."

She sighed. "But, unfortunately, true love does not always conquer all. Back to your task, Hibiki."

With a look of fierce concentration on her face, Yonoko sketched a symbol in green fire in the air above one of the cat figurines. The fiery symbol slowly descended, draping the figurine like a glowing cloak.

The yellow tiger that had been Ryoga Hibiki suddenly threw its head up and screamed. When it lowered its head, the greenish glow in its eyes was as bright as ever.

Akane shouted, "NOOO!!!" She had been so close to getting through to him....

Ranma's head jerked around when he heard the desperation and panic in Akane's voice. The others were also shouting but Akane's voice was the only one that mattered. He instantly lunged for the yellow tiger.

The blue tiger took ruthless advantage of Ranma's distraction. It pounced, plunging its massive claws deep into his back. Ranma's struggles soon forced the blue tiger to bring all its weight to bear in an effort to subdue its thrashing victim. Blood began to ooze from beneath Ranma's body as his furious efforts to escape only caused the tiger's claws to tear even deeper.

"RANMA!!!" Akane and Nodoka both screamed.

Horrified as it was to see Ranma mauled by the blue tiger, the women had their own tiger problem to worry about. The yellow tiger crouched slightly.

Everyone jumped as Ranma abruptly let loose a shriek of indescribable fury. Even the yellow tiger snapped its head around to look. Nearby glass panes shattered. The blue tiger was flung aside as a shimmering aura of violet-blue-black energy suddenly coalesced around Ranma's body.

Yonoko's eyes gleamed with triumph. She exultantly whispered, "Oh yes!"

> Part 1d: A Taste of Things to Come

Akane and the others stared in shock as the dark battle aura stabilized into the semi-transparent form of a huge predatory cat. Using the battle aura as an extension of his own body, Ranma casually swatted the charging blue tiger aside, sending it flying amid a spray of blood. The blue beast slammed into a nearby tree with such force that the sturdy tree trunk snapped. The leafy top of the tree slowly toppled to the ground and landed on the tiger's limp body with a lazy WHOMP .

As the blue tiger hit the tree, one of the cat figurines on the table exploded. Broken shards went flying. Yonoko gasped in pain as the spells binding Tatewaki Kuno suddenly snapped, but she refused to be distracted.

Ranma then pounced on the startled yellow tiger, digging the aura's front 'paws' into the creature's flanks. The tiger desperately tried to shake Ranma off its back. When that tactic failed, it twisted around and tried to sink its teeth and claws into the battle aura surrounding the young man.

Ranma responded by slashing at the yellow tiger's face with a front 'paw' as he simultaneously raked the tiger's underbelly with his hind 'paws'. Blood flew as Ranma's first blow peeled away nearly half the yellow tiger's face. This time, there was no instant healing for the creature's injuries.

Blinded in one eye, the tiger screamed in agony as it wrenched itself free of Ranma's grasp. It weakly staggered to its feet. Dark red blood poured from the gaping wounds on its face and belly. Paralyzed both by the sheer power of the battle aura and by Ranma's terrible ferocity, the women could only watch as he began to rip the tiger apart. Slowly.

Yonoko gritted her teeth. "Unbelievable!"

The actual physical damage Saotome inflicted was nothing compared to the non-physical damage he was doing. Somehow, his attacks were disrupting the magical spells binding Hibiki as well as wreaking havoc on his opponent's lifeforce. The regeneration spell had been the first to go.

(So why am I even trying to keep Hibiki going?)

Saotome had manifested the greater powers of the Neko-ken. That was all that was important. But an irresistible curiosity made her continue the struggle. Yonoko wanted to see just how far she could go.

Finally, Ranma's merciless onslaught was simply too much for Yonoko. As she sagged to the floor, her body trembling with exhaustion, she released the spells binding Ryoga Hibiki to her will. The remaining cat figurine abruptly crumbled into dust.

No matter how tired she felt, Yonoko was very pleased. She had accomplished what she had set out to do and Saotome had far exceeded her expectations.

"Well, Ebon. He's all yours."

Down in the Tendo compound, the yellow tiger suddenly uttered an agonized groan before collapsing into a bloody heap of fur.

Ranma warily watched for a renewed attack from either opponent. When it became clear that neither tiger was capable of even moving, the eerie blackish battle aura wavered and dissipated. He snarled softly in triumph and moved in to finish off the yellow tiger.

Akane suddenly lunged forward but Ukyo grabbed her. "Akane! What are you doing?"

"I've got to stop him!"

Ukyo said accusingly, "Weren't you the one telling us that he's too dangerous to mess around with? And now you turn around and...."

Akane was beyond tact at the moment. All she cared about was stopping Ranma from doing something that he would consider unforgivable. She wasn't interested in her own safety, nor did she have the energy to spare Ukyo's feelings.

She snapped irritably, "Hey, I don't care what you think, Ukyo! All I know is that I've GOT to stop him! Self-defense is one thing but killing Ryoga now would be cold-blooded murder! And if you don't understand THAT, you don't understand Ranma at all!"

She twisted herself free of Ukyo's grasp, then quickly stepped across the scarred flagstones until she stood only a few feet away from him.

"R-r-ran...?" Akane coughed, then tried again. "Ranma?"

Hovering over the yellow tiger, Ranma merely uttered a distracted growl. He didn't bother looking at her.

"Ranma, please!"

He ignored her.

Akane edged closer, then carefully put her hand on his back. When he didn't object to the contact, she put her other hand on his unwounded shoulder. She applied a gentle tug, trying to urge him away from Ryoga. However, Akane immediately realized that despite his injuries, Ranma was still very strong. Actually, he was much stronger than she had ever remembered. There would be no budging him by force.

(He's so focused on the kill.... How can I possibly get through to him?)

She saw him prepare to sink his teeth into the tiger's throat. Before

she could think about it, Akane shoved her hand in front of Ranma's face in an effort to stop him. Ranma immediately froze in mid-bite when he felt her fingers in his mouth.

Shampoo hissed softly, "Stupid Akane! What you do?"

"P-p-putting my hand in the tiger's jaws...?" Akane's voice wavered just a little bit.

Ranma glanced sideways at her, without moving or lifting his head. She felt him apply just a bit of pressure. It could have been a warning -- or a test -- but it wasn't enough to break the skin. Akane gasped but refused to move her hand. Knowing that words meant nothing to him, Akane did her best to make her voice both firm and soothing.

"No, Ranma. You don't want to do this. Leave him alone. Please."

She leaned closer, trying to ignore the smell of fresh blood. Akane murmured into his ear, "There's no need to hurt him any more. You've won. Ranma. Please stop it."

A long, still minute passed, then Ranma released his grip on her hand. As he reluctantly backed away from Ryoga, he briefly brushed his cheek against her, leaving a bloody smear on her legs. However, instead of snuggling against her as he usually did in his cat-mode, Ranma chose to crouch at her feet, alert for new challengers or new dangers.

When the other fiancées and Nodoka saw Akane successfully make contact with Ranma, they took a few tentative steps forward. Ranma did not appreciate the intrusion. His eyes narrowed and he hissed a soft warning.

Nodoka turned pale as her son gave her a cold, wary stare. Whatever lay between her and Ranma -- love, fear, whatever -- she knew that she meant nothing to the creature now staring out of her son's eyes. Ukyo also looked very upset by Ranma's hostile reaction. In sharp contrast to the chef, Shampoo seemed more resigned than surprised by his behavior.

Akane awkwardly tried to ease the distress she saw in Nodoka's eyes. "Mrs. Saotome, he...."

Nodoka made an abrupt gesture, cutting off Akane's explanation. Unwilling to face the pain and grief in Nodoka's eyes, Akane looked away. She muttered, "Could ... could you guys check on Ryoga and Kuno? I'm sort of occupied...."

She gazed down worriedly at Ranma. The rage was pretty much gone but he wasn't calm. With her hand on his shoulder, Akane could still feel the tension in his body.

(What's wrong? He seems to be waiting for something....)

After returning the Saotome sword to Nodoka, Shampoo carefully edged past Akane and Ranma to take a look at the yellow tiger. She stiffened in surprise, then ripped open the tiger's fur with a sudden jerk, exposing Ryoga's naked body. His injuries looked relatively

mild when compared to the terrible wounds inflicted on his tiger form, but there was no doubt that he was severely injured.

"He ... lost boy still alive! And not so badly hurt!"

Ukyo blinked and muttered, "That means ... Kuno." She nudged Kodachi hard. When she failed to get any reaction, Ukyo hastily moved toward the fallen tree. After a brief delay as she cleared tree branches, Ukyo yelled, "The same thing over here! But we need an ambulance now!"

Akane heaved a deep sigh of relief. (I was afraid I was going to have to tell Ranma that he.... Kuno's can be such a pest but he doesn't deserve to die! And thank goodness Ryoga's not TOO badly hurt.)

At that moment, Nabiki walked into the compound.

[Back to the present....]

As Nabiki frantically retreated from Ranma's charge, she heard a familiar male voice shout, "Ranma! I won't let you touch Shampoo!"

An instant later, Mousse plowed into Nabiki from behind.

Akane and the Amazon acted in unison. Akane somehow managed to throw herself in front of Ranma, shouting, "NO!" At the same time, Shampoo lunged toward Nabiki and Mousse.

With inhuman speed, Ranma easily dodged around Akane. However, her interference bought Shampoo just enough time. Shoving Nabiki aside with one hand, the Amazon grabbed Mousse and heaved him into the street. She then blocked the gateway with her own body, then closed her eyes and braced herself for impact.

Fortunately for Shampoo, Ranma seemed disinclined to pursue Mousse off the Tendo property. She cautiously looked down to see Ranma crouching a few feet away, growling softly. Akane quickly knelt down beside him, holding him in her arms and murmuring softly.

Akane desperately wanted to check on Nabiki, but she knew that keeping Ranma calm had to be her main concern. Mrs. Saotome or one of the other girls could take care of her sister but no one else was remotely capable of dealing with Ranma right now. Thankfully, aside from the dazed look on her face, Nabiki looked all right. Ranma, on the other hand....

Rolling to his feet, Mousse yelled in Chinese, "Shampoo! Why...!?"

Shampoo turned around but continued to block the gateway. She shouted, "Mousse, stay back! Ranma's too angry now to let another male into his territory!"

Ukyo shouted, "Shampoo, what the hell's going on!? What are you jabbering about?"

Shampoo gave her a quick glance and said in her usual broken Japanese, "Shampoo tell Mousse that Ranma no want other males in territory."

"'Territory'? What do you mean, 'territory'!?" Mousse and the others asked together.

Shampoo sighed and said, "Ranma act like male cat. Male cat no like other rival males on territory!" She turned back to Mousse and putting as much female authority as she could in her voice, she sternly said, "Mousse, go back to the restaurant!"

"Shampoo, I'm not going to leave you alone with that... that beast!"

As if in response to Mousse's words, Ranma bared his teeth and hissed nastily. Mousse couldn't prevent himself from flinching at the blatant threat.

"Stupid Mousse! If you challenge him now, YOU...WILL...DIE." Shampoo said flatly. In quieter tones, she said, "Go back to the Neko-hanten and great grandmother. I'll... be along later."

He hesitated.

"PLEASE."

Mousse looked extremely reluctant to go but something in Shampoo's manner finally persuaded him. He gave Ranma one last wary look before leaving.

As she watched Mousse depart, Ukyo asked, "What's all this garbage about rival males, huh?"

Shampoo shrugged and simply repeated what she had said before. "Ranma-cat no like male intruders on territory."

"You're still not making any sense!" The chef glared at the Amazon.

Akane added, "And Ranma's never acted like this before!"

Shampoo looked at Akane and said, "This different from other challenges, other fights. Kuno and lost boy try to take EVERYTHING away from Ranma-cat. Life, home...." She stopped abruptly and grimaced slightly. Finally, she continued in the faintest of whispers.

"....and mate...."

Akane's mouth dropped open in shock.

Ukyo shook her head violently and blurted out, "That's crazy! Ran-chan doesn't think of Akane as his...his...."

Shampoo said flatly, "Human Ranma maybe not know right now. But cat-side know for sure."

Ukyo slowly shook her head and said quietly, "No. NO. You're WRONG, Shampoo. I don't know what's going on but that..." Ukyo pointed at

the young man crouching beside Akane.

"...that... creature... is NOT Ran-chan. It may be his body but THAT is not him at all."

Akane looked up sharply and said softly, "Ukyo, I can understand why you're so... upset but please believe me. This IS Ranma. The Ranma we know is in here... somewhere." She gently stroked Ranma's back as he started to clean his face and hands with precise licks of his tongue.

In a surprisingly harsh and bitter voice, Ukyo said, "Yes. I'm sure you'd like to believe that." She looked as if she might have said much more, but chose to keep any additional thoughts to herself.

Turning away from Akane, she said coolly, "I think I'll keep an eye on Kuno until the ambulance arrives."

Nabiki lay on her back, trying to recover from a staggering physical shock and also an equally impressive mental one.

She had always considered Ranma's cat-side to be amusing or annoying. Sometimes it was both. But now, Nabiki knew that she had been wrong. Very, very wrong.

(It's not a joke. Not anymore.)

She had always thought of Ranma as a bit of a buffoon, someone strong but not too bright. Someone easily manipulated. It wasn't that she didn't like Ranma. She DID like him. However, she had never really... respected him.

How stupid could she be?

(You respect a gun. You respect a bomb. Why didn't it ever occur to me that Ranma could be just as dangerous?)

She answered her own question. (Because I've been relying way too much on Ranma's good nature, that's why. Because I expect him to hold back, no matter how badly I treat him.)

After all, Ranma put up with Akane's constant physical and verbal abuse, her own schemes, and their fathers' persistent meddling. He might have resented the way the Tendos and his own father treated him, but he didn't really DO anything about it. Ranma almost never retaliated. Instead, he simply endured. Furthermore, any resentment he might have felt certainly didn't stop him from doing his utmost to protect everyone, even at the possible cost of his own life.

However, the carnage Nabiki had just seen forcibly reminded her that Ranma was a very powerful, very highly skilled martial artist -- one who wouldn't have any problems taking out the entire Tendo household. And if he really wanted to, he could probably level a good portion of Nerima.

Considering what Ranma had been through in the last two years, it was

a minor miracle that something like that hadn't already happened.

Nabiki felt more than a little guilty. She may not have been directly responsible for a lot of Ranma's problems. But she hadn't helped -- at least, not nearly as much as she could have. Instead of making things easier for him, she had often made things worse just to milk the maximum profit out of a situation. Sometimes she made things worse for the sheer amusement value. Like the time she had sold the information about Akane's and Ranma's secret wedding to half the people in Nerima....

Well, the games were over.

(I don't what happened here but I have to find out. If Ranma's out of control, if something's pushed him over the edge, we're all in serious trouble. For our sake... for Ranma's sake... I've got to do my best to sort this mess out. Somehow. I owe him that much.)

She reluctantly added, (And if worst comes to worst, I need to be ready for that, too.)

Nabiki saw Shampoo standing over her. The Amazon looked a bit worried.

"So sorry Shampoo throw so hard. Was emergency."

"Ugghhhh..."

Finally emerging from her trance, Kodachi started to walk toward Akane and Ranma. There was a strange smile on her face.

"Oh, Ranma darling! You were... truly MAGNIFICENT. Such power, such strength!" Kodachi was almost purring herself.

"So...dominant."

Akane felt Ranma go utterly still. Seriously alarmed, she attempted to warn Kodachi off. "Stay back! You're upsetting him!"

The younger Kuno sibling didn't bother to reply but moved even closer. Her eyes glittered with feverish excitement.

Akane could sense the anger building in Ranma. It was a cold anger, quite unlike his hot-blooded rage at Kuno and Ryoga -- and possibly even more dangerous.

"Hey! Stupid crazy girl! What you think you do?" Shampoo shouted as she helped Nabiki to her feet.

"Kodachi! What's wrong with you? You're only making him mad. Back off!" Akane stepped between Ranma and Kodachi.

The Black Rose did not appreciate the favor. "How DARE you interfere!? Stand aside, you cretinous whore!"

Akane flushed at the insult but tried her best to ignore it. Sneaking a quick peek at Ranma, she could see his eyes narrowing. His muscles

tensed. Those were NOT good signs.

"Kodachi, this isn't the time or the place for your crazy games. You could get seriously hurt!"

"You should be worrying about yourself, you gutter tramp! I'll make you suffer for your presumption!" Kodachi whipped out her ribbon and started to twirl it.

Ranma snarled ominously. Akane clutched at his shoulders in an effort to keep him from going after Kodachi.

"Keep your hands off of him, you slut! He's MINE!" Kodachi shrieked.

As she pulled the ribbon back to strike, Nodoka quickly stepped forward and grabbed Kodachi by the arm. In very firm, authoritative tones, she said, "DON'T."

Kodachi glared at Nodoka who sternly returned her gaze.

While Kodachi and Nodoka were engaged in their own private staring contest, Akane concentrated on Ranma. Her control, if she even call it that, was very fragile. If he really wanted to attack someone, nobody could stop him.

(I've got snap Ranma out of this before anything else happens. Who knows how he'll react to Father or Mr. Saotome? Ranma has enough problems with his father when he's in the 'normal' Neko-ken but the way he is NOW.... And if Happosai shows up!?) She didn't want to think about what might happen.

"Nabiki?"

There was a faint groan. "Yeah, Akane?"

"Are you all right?"

"Uh-huh. I've felt better, though."

"Can you handle things here? I've got to do something about Ranma."

Nabiki waved her sister off. "Sure. The last thing we need is for Ranma to go running amuck. Again."

Akane gently coaxed him around the corner of the house. Fortunately, he seemed content to follow. At the sight of the koi pond, she hesitated briefly.

(Should I push him into the water and hope that making him change into a girl will snap him back to normal? No, better not. If he's this bad, there's no guarantee that it'll work. And the last thing I want to do is upset or startle him. That was no bluff. He was really going to kill Ryoga! If he runs off, there's no telling what he might do if provoked! If Ranma seriously hurts or kills someone, he'll never forgive himself.) Visions of tanto blades and great puddles of blood came all too vividly to mind.

Once inside the house, Ranma dashed down the hall and bounded up the

stairs. Akane chased after him.

"Ranma, wait!"

As she passed the front door, she heard a familiar voice outside saying, "Oh my!"

Akane grabbed the door handle and pulled. It moved easily.

(No problem opening it NOW, of course!)

Everyone outside jumped when Akane abruptly flung the front door open. In a rush, she said, "Kasumi, Nabiki, make sure everyone stays downstairs until I say it's okay, all right?" With those words, she turned and dashed up the stairs. Akane followed the trail of bloody prints to her bedroom. Inside, Ranma tensely prowled back and forth.

Akane closed her door, then after a brief hesitation, locked it. She wearily sat on the floor and called to him softly.

"Ranma? Come here. Come on. No one wants to fight with you. Here, Ranma." She repeated her coaxing and cooing a few more times before he approached. With a little gentle pressure, Akane finally managed to get Ranma to lie down beside her with his head in her lap. When her hand brushed against a blood-encrusted spot on his hip, she suddenly remembered that Ranma had been badly hurt by his opponents.

(I completely forgot!) However, Akane's eyes widened in disbelief as she pulled his clothes aside to get a closer look at his injuries.

(What!? They're... they're almost gone!) Indeed, the bone-deep gashes were now only faint reddish lines. She struggled to stay calm.

(I know Ranma's a fast healer but... but this is impossible!) She hastily checked Ranma's other wounds and found the same thing. Except for the rips in his clothes and the blood, there was hardly any signs that he had been hurt.

As Akane sat on the floor of her room struggling to make sense of recent events, she numbly continued to stroke Ranma's fine black hair. She was greatly relieved when Ranma gradually began to relax. She was even happier to hear him purring.

She whispered to herself, "Just this morning, I was hoping for something to change. Well, they say you should be careful of what you wish for, because you just might get it."

Oh yes, things had most definitely changed and NOT for the better. The only good thing that happened was Shampoo's apparent change of heart. But everything else.... Kuno and Ryoga were both injured. How badly, she didn't know. Kodachi's obsession with Ranma looked like it had gotten worse and more twisted, if that was possible. Ukyo seemed to be unable -- or unwilling -- to deal with Ranma's cat-side and the Neko-ken. Ranma's mother also appeared to have real problems accepting Ranma's present condition.

Looking down at him, she gazed into Ranma's drowsy, half-opened eyes.

He looked back with a cat's cool, inscrutable gaze.

She whispered softly, "Oh, Ranma. I know you're in there, somewhere. Come back. Come back to me. I need to know that you're okay. You're really worrying me, you idiot." The last words came out more like a caress than an insult. As if sensing her distress, Ranma uttered a soft, soothing croon and rubbed his cheek against her leg.

Akane patiently waited. In the distance, she could hear the wail of ambulance sirens come, stop, and go. A little while longer, she could hear another sort of wail. It was the familiar cry of her father who was undoubtedly bemoaning all the property damage.

Many minutes passed before Ranma finally stirred. He murmured "Akane...", wrapped his arms around her waist, nuzzled his face against her stomach, and fell asleep.

In the sanctuary of Akane's arms, Ranma enjoyed his last few moments of innocence and peace.

(End of Part 1)

>

<p>

Author's Notes:

Part 2 - The morning mayhem's is finished but who will pick up the pieces?

^_-

> CREDITS: <p>

Additional inspiration from:

"The Whisper" by Queensryche
> WEREWOLF: THE APOCALYPSE (and associated materials) by White Wolf Publishing, Inc.;
 TIGER CLAWS, copyrighted 1991 by Tiger Claws Production, Ltd.;
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> FujitaShogakukan;
> REJAR by Dara Joy. <p>

Additional fanfic mentions: ^_^

"Hearts of Ice" by Krista Perry and "Nekophobia" by David Eddy for starting my obsessive interest in the neko-stuff.

Many thanks to my pre-readers, for their suggestions, critiques, and

support. ^_^

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> ----- <p>

2. Part 2

> <meta name="generator"> Ranma 1/2 - Tiger Claw (part
2)

> TIGER CLAW
 Part 2: DAMAGE CONTROL
> ----- <p>

A Ranma 1/2 fanfic by Madamhydra@aol.com

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> IMPORTANT NOTE:

This is a continuation/ALTERNATE REALITY fanfic. While the story follows the manga (and video) continuity to just after Mount Phoenix (volume 38), the subsequent wedding ceremony (and the related bombing by Shampoo and Ukyo) does NOT occur. In this story, a different incident involving the planned wedding took place.

> <p>

Only a limited number of the main characters have actually SEEN the Neko-ken (the Tendos, Genma, Shampoo, Cologne, Gosunkugi or Sasuke, and Kuno), although others may have heard rumors about it.

> Text Conventions

() - thoughts

> <p>

- sound fx

> <p>

" " - Chinese

> <p>

[] - signs

> <p>

Curse forms are denoted by appropriate suffixes (-chan, -neko, -panda, etc.) except for Ryoga (P-chan) and Mousse (Muu-Muu).

Part 2a: Comings and Goings

Nabiki watched Akane and Ranma disappear around the corner of the house, then heaved a deep sigh of relief. The sigh instantly turned into a gasp as she felt a sharp stab of pain in her ribs.

Shampoo gave her a concerned look, but Nabiki waved her away. She briefly surveyed the damage to the house, then walked over to the broken tree and Ukyo. Recognizing the naked man pinned under the tree trunk, Nabiki ruefully shook her head and muttered, "Oh, Kuno, you really did it this time, didn't you?"

"He certainly doesn't look too good." Ukyo said softly. "He's way too pale and his breathing sounds really bad." She suddenly glance behind Nabiki. Turning around, Nabiki saw Kasumi standing in the gateway, her arms full of groceries and a vaguely stunned expression on her face.

"Oh... OH MY!"

Everyone then jumped in surprise when Akane flung the front door open. She blurted out, "Kasumi, Nabiki, make sure everyone stays downstairs until I say it's okay, all right?" With those words, she disappeared back into the house and they all heard her running up the stairs.

Kodachi, who had somehow been stared into some semblance of decorum by Nodoka's steely gaze, abruptly sprang back to life. She snapped her ribbon back into the air and shrieked, "Vile temptress, how dare you steal my darling Ranma away!" She bounded past a startled Nodoka and headed for the inside of the house.

"Stop her!!!" Nabiki yelled.

Ukyo had been doing her best to stay calm, but Kodachi's latest antics were simply the last straw. She automatically reached for her battle spatula, then remembered....

(Damn it! I left it behind at the restaurant this morning!)

With a furious gleam in her eyes, Ukyo grabbed the closest throwable object. She flung it at Kodachi with all her strength while yelling, "JUST... GIVE... IT... UP!!!". The broken tree branch bounced off the back of Kodachi's head, knocking the obsessed gymnast out cold.

Everyone turned to stare at the chef. She stood with her fists clenched and her chest heaving in rage. When Ukyo finally noticed the strange looks she was getting, she snarled, "IT'S BEEN A REALLY BAD DAY, OKAY!?"

Nabiki muttered, "Ummmm, right."

While Ukyo was dealing with Kodachi, Kasumi had dumped her groceries on the ground and was now kneeling beside Ryoga. She checked his pulse, frowning at the coolness of his skin.

"Nabiki, hurry and call an ambulance! You also need to contact Dr. Tofu. Tell him to go to the hospital right now."

"Tofu? Kasumi, why...?"

"Please, Nabiki!"

Responding to the quiet urgency in Kasumi's voice, Nabiki hastily stepped over Kodachi's body and went indoors to use the phone. After terse conversations with emergency services and Dr. Tofu, she made one additional call to the Kuno residence.

"Sasuke, this is Nabiki Tendo. Come to the dojo right now and pick up Kodachi." She hung up before the Kuno retainer could ask any questions.

She went back outside to find Kasumi examining Kuno. Nabiki asked her sister again, "Why Dr. Tofu?"

Kasumi looked as worried as Nabiki had ever seen her. "They're dying, Nabiki."

"What!?"

"That can't be! They may be hurt but I've seen these guys fight with worse injuries!" protested Ukyo.

"Worse physical injuries, perhaps. But that's not what's killing them, Ukyo. There's something terribly wrong with their chi. It's like their chi is somehow being...." She groped for the right word. "...being twisted or warped."

Shampoo gasped.

Nabiki stared at her sister with astonishment. "You can TELL?"

Kasumi blushed and murmured, "Well, I have read some books. And that nice Mrs. Nikita at the teashop taught me a few things. I'm certainly not an expert like Dr. Tofu, but I can sense when something's seriously wrong. Martial artists usually have strong, clear energy patterns in their bodies. But Ryoga's and Kuno's chi are in terrible shape. The flow of chi simply isn't there like it should be."

Ukyo thought, (Ran-chan couldn't have done this. He'd never use such a vicious attack. It's got to be some horrible side effect of whatever crazy magic Kuno and Ryoga were under.)

Kasumi suddenly blinked, then glanced around in confusion. "Where's Ranma?"

The girls stared at each other, then looked away in different directions. Kasumi stood up and said, "Oh my! He's not...?"

Nabiki said, "He's upstairs with Akane at the moment. I'm sure she'll let us know if there's anything...wrong with him." She muttered under her breath, "I hope...."

Kasumi gave her sister an inquiring look. "Nabiki, what happened?"

She shrugged and said, "Don't ask me what's going on. I managed to miss most of it. All I know for sure is that Ranma went 'cat' on us again. That's it."

They could now hear the sound of rapidly approaching sirens. Kasumi reached into her pockets, pulled out a small notepad, and hastily scribbled a note.

It was all over in a few brief moments. The paramedics quickly placed Ryoga on a stretcher and wheeled him away. With Shampoo's help, they pried Kuno from beneath the tree trunk and stuffed him into the ambulance beside Ryoga. Before they left, Kasumi handed the note to one of the paramedics.

"Please make sure that Dr. Tofu receives this." He nodded briskly and hurried off.

Ukyo asked, "Kasumi, what's with the note? Why didn't you just go yourself?"

Kasumi frowned slightly on the bloodstains on her new skirt and said placidly, "I have to be here in case Akane and Ranma need me. And I have to take care of Father when he returns. Goodness. He'll be so upset."

As the wails of the ambulance faded in the distance, Soun Tendo and Genma-panda rushed into the compound. The sight of the blood-splattered walkway brought them to a screeching halt. There was a long moment of silence as the two men took in the scene.

Genma-panda's sign read, [What's going on!?!]

"ARGHHHH!!!! WHAT HAPPENED!?! Akane! Where's Akane?" Soun stared around wildly.

Nabiki's lip curled ever so slightly. (Dad, you're going to be a great help. As usual.)

Kasumi briskly stepped to her father's side. In a soothing voice, she said, "Akane's fine, Father. She's upstairs at the moment. How about some tea?" She gently, but firmly, led her father around the house toward the side porch.

Genma-panda had been unaware of his wife's presence until she spoke up in a stern voice. "GENMA!!!"

The panda's sign read, [W-w-wife?]

In very even tones, she said, "Do you have ANY idea what I've just seen this morning?"

[Uhhh. Nope!]

"What have you DONE to our son!?"

[????]

"The cats, Genma! The cats!"

[Ohhhhh....]

"Is that all you can SAY!?" With her sword clutched in a white-knuckled grip, Nodoka advanced on the panda, grabbed a furry ear, and dragged her husband into the house. "We are going to have a long talk and you are going to face it like a man! AS A MAN!"

Nabiki, Shampoo, and Ukyo remained in the entranceway, along with the still unconscious Kodachi. Ukyo started to say something but Nabiki halted her with a raised hand. An instant later, there was a blur of black as Sasuke landed several feet away from them.

He took a quick look around and yelped, "Ahhh!!! What's this!?" With Kodachi sprawled on the ground and two of her rivals for Saotome's affections standing over her, it was no wonder that the little ninja assumed the worst.

"What have you done to Mistress Kodachi!?"

Nabiki snapped, "Cool it, Sasuke. She's just been knocked unconscious. I'm sure it's happened plenty of times before. Just get her the hell out of here."

The ninja blinked. Faced with some obviously irate martial artists -- female ones, at that -- he opted for a strategic retreat. He heaved Kodachi over his shoulder, then staggered a bit under her weight.

"Oh, and Sasuke...."

"Yes, Ms. Tendo?"

"If you want her to stay healthy, you'll do everything in your power to keep her away from Ranma for at least 24 hours."

"Did Saotome do this to her? Master Kuno will...."

Nabiki coolly interrupted. "Kuno's being taken to Central Hospital at this very moment. He may not live."

"He may not WHAT!?"

Ukyo stalked up to Sasuke and said, "You heard her, pipsqueak. He challenged Ran-chan this morning and Kuno lost, big-time." She moved even closer. "You won't know anything about that challenge, would you? Or rumors about a secret wedding, huh? Or about THIS!?" She waved one of the tattered, blood-stained tiger skins beneath Sasuke's nose.

"Oh... oh, no...." The little ninja went very pale.

"What!? You little toad, you DO know something!" Ukyo looked like she

was about to pounce on Sasuke.

"Uh, well.... I mean, no! I can't.... I've got to get Mistress Kodachi back to the house!"

Nabiki eyed him coldly. "Sasuke, I WILL be talking to you and I WILL expect answers. Got it?"

"Um.... yes."

"Then don't stand there. Get out of here."

Sasuke trudged out the Tendos' yard, constantly juggling Kodachi around in an effort to keep her hair and feet from dragging on the ground. After he left, Nabiki carefully bent down and picked up a sword that had been lying forgotten in a puddle of blood. Its scabbard lay nearby, amid Kuno's torn clothing. She carefully wiped the blood off the blade with Kuno's shirt as she took a good look at the weapon.

(A real sword. Kuno certainly wasn't fooling around this time. It's quite a beauty. And valuable.)

She cocked her head slightly. (Hmm. I've seen it before, but where?) As she carefully slid the sword back into its sheath, Nabiki's eyes abruptly widened.

(Of course! I've seen its picture all over Kuno's house. This isn't just any old katana. This is THE Kuno family honor blade. It's been in their family for centuries! This sword is so valuable that the Kunos keep it locked up in the family shrine. For Kuno to even consider using it...!)

"Nabiki? You okay?" Shampoo asked.

She started. "Oh! Yeah, I'm fine. Come on, ladies. I think we all need to have a long talk."

The girls joined Soun, a damp Genma, and a quietly enraged Nodoka in the living room. As Kasumi deftly served everyone with tea, Nabiki said, "Now, if you ladies can tell us what happened this morning?" In a slightly more empathic voice, she added, "Mrs. Saotome, why don't you start off? Ukyo? You and Shampoo can fill in the details."

Part 2b: WAKING NIGHTMARES

Akane sensed the familiar muscle twinge that told her that a bad leg cramp was probably on its way. She then looked down at Ranma who was peacefully snoozing in her lap.

(I don't want to wake him up but I've got to do something before that cramp gets any worse. Maybe if I move slowly enough....)

Trying to keep her movements to a minimum, Akane slowly straightened her leg. As she leaned forward to massage it, Ranma started to stir. Akane waited nervously for him to wake up.

(Will he be okay?)

His pillow was moving.

Ranma drowsily opened his eyes and stared at the blue cotton fabric brushing his nose. He frowned in confusion.

(Blue? My pillow's not blue.) He then grimaced at the sticky, metallic taste in his mouth.

(Ugh. Where have I tasted THAT before?)

He slowly lifted his head a few inches and struggled to focus his eyes. After blinking once or twice, he gradually recognized the bright yellow-on-blue patterns hovering just beyond his nose.

(Umm... flowers. Just like the sunflowers on Akane's favorite T-shirt. Hold it.... they ARE the sunflowers on her....)

At that moment, Ranma suddenly realized that his face was snuggled between two soft, warm mounds. Mounds that were moving in time with the quiet, breathing noises....

(Moving? Two of them? Akane's T-shirt!?)

(Oh no....)

Ranma looked up VERY slowly and saw Akane staring down at him with an intense frown on her face. There was a deep flush in her cheeks. He realized with a horrified start that he was in a very Happosai-ish pose -- his arms tight around her waist, his face crammed between her breasts....

His immediate thought was, (I am going to DIE.)

Ranma flung himself off Akane and was up against the far wall in a flash. Wrapping his arms protectively over his head, he babbled, "No! It's not what you think! I wasn't.... I don't mean to.... It was an accident!"

(Oh, give it up. She's never going to believe you....). Ranma sighed and waited for the full wrath of Akane to fall on him.

He waited. And waited.

When nothing happened, he slowly lowered his arms and snuck a cautious peek in Akane's direction. She hadn't moved at all. Akane continued to sit on the floor, staring blankly at him. As he watched, she slowly placed her hand on her chest where his face had just been. Amazingly, she didn't look angry at all.

She looked nervous, almost... frightened.

Ranma stared at her in bewilderment, then gasped when he saw the reddish brown splotches all over her skin and clothes. But it was the metallic smell that really clicked in his brain.

It was blood. She was covered in BLOOD.

"Akane!"

Horrified, he lunged to his feet and reached out to her. Then he noticed the same reddish brown stains all over his own hands. And his arms. Ranma froze. Looked down very slowly. Numbly watched his hand as it slowly picked at his torn clothes. Saw little dark flakes fall off the blood-encrusted cloth.

(That taste in my mouth.... What's going on?) he dazedly wondered.

Ranma's knees hit the floor as he frantically went over his memories of the last few hours. He had been practicing in the back yard. Then his mother and his fiancées had showed up. Then Ryoga and Kuno had arrived to challenge him over some crazy rumor of a wedding. And... and... and then nothing.

He could remember NOTHING before waking up in Akane's room.

Staring at the dried blood caked on his hands, he wracked his brain. There had to be more. There had to be some scrap of memory that would tell him how he got into this state.

(The Neko-ken? Got to be it.... But what....)

He'd had blackouts before. He'd woken up in weird and embarrassing situations before. But nothing like this. He shivered. His body had been running round and he had NO idea what it had been doing.

One expected at least a little blood during a fight. But this time, Ranma looked like he had been in a bloodbath. Literally.

He desperately hoped that at least some of the blood was his. He could deal with that. But after he hurriedly checked himself out, Ranma knew that it couldn't be his own blood. He had no injuries. He felt okay. Except for some minor soreness, he actually felt... pretty good.

For some reason, a picture of lions came to mind -- lions fresh off a kill, lazily cleaning the blood off their fur.

(No. That's impossible. It couldn't be. I couldn't have!)

In a sick voice, Ranma whispered, "What... what happened? What... what have I done!? I... I can't REMEMBER!"

Akane barely had a chance to realize that Ranma was back to his normal self. The next thing she knew, he was up against the far wall, babbling incoherent excuses.

At first, she couldn't quite figure out what he was talking about... then she understood.

(He's scared that I'll bash him for acting like that pervert Happosai!)

She nearly burst into hysterical laughter. She wished it was something so simple. And under normal circumstances, he would have been right. She would have clobbered him in an instant, just like he expected.

But Akane quickly sobered when she saw the look on Ranma's face. He had finally noticed all the blood. His face went stark white. Then she became really frightened when he sank to his knees on the floor. And that terrifying blankness in his eyes. She could sense him retreating deep inside his own mind. His anguished whisper told her exactly what was going through his brain.

She jumped to her feet and ran over to him. Grabbing his shoulders, Akane shook him as hard as she could.

"Ranma!"

There was no response. She shook him harder, then slapped his face hard.

"Ranma!!!"

The barely suppressed panic in her voice finally reached him. He blinked, then grabbed her arms. In a frantic voice, he asked her, "Akane! Are you all right!? You aren't.... I didn't...." He couldn't make himself say the words.

"No, Ranma! I-I-I'm fine. None of this blood's mine! I'm not hurt at all!"

He sagged with relief, then he looked even more confused. "Then... then whose blood...?"

Akane bit her lip and didn't immediately answer. Ranma's whole body tensed. "Akane! Whose blood is it!? Tell me!" His grip tightened and threatened to leave bruises.

She suddenly realized that Ranma must be assuming the worst from her silence. Akane hurriedly blurted out, "It's yours...."

He instantly shook his head. (No way!)

"... and the... the creatures' that tried to attack us."

"Creatures? WHAT creatures!? Are you sure?"

"Yes, yes, I'm sure! The other girls and your mother are fine!"

"What about Ryoga? Kuno?" He sounded surprisingly concerned about two guys who had been hell-bent on killing him.

"Ranma, it's a bit hard to explain."

"Akane, what's going on!?"

She took a deep breath. "What do you remember?"

Ranma froze. (Why don't she just spit it out?)

He whispered, "Facing off against Kuno and Ryoga. And then... nothing." He paused. "The Neko-ken, right?" The torn expression on his face indicated that he didn't know whether he wanted a 'yes' or 'no' answer.

She nodded and chose her words with exquisite care. "Ryoga and Kuno... suddenly changed into these big, horrible cat monsters. Giant tigers, really. They tried to attack you and the rest of us. That made you to go into your 'cat-mode' and you managed to fight them off. Barely."

Ranma slowly released her arms, looked away briefly, then turned back to her. "Did... did I...."

"They're not dead. I'm pretty sure they're still alive." She couldn't quite meet his eyes although she tried.

He closed his eyes, then whispered, "You're 'pretty sure'?"

Akane reluctantly answered the unspoken question. "They were... badly hurt. I heard the ambulance take them away."

Ranma jerked his head down to stare fixedly at his blood-covered hands, but not before Akane caught a glimpse of the fear and self-loathing in his eyes.

She shook him slightly. "Ranma, listen to me! I'm not entirely sure what went on out there but I do know this. What happened to Kuno and Ryoga was NOT your fault!"

"Not my fault...." he echoed dully.

"Ranma, if it hadn't been for you -- me, Ukyo, your mom, and everyone else would probably be dead right now! Ryoga and Kuno... they turned into some sort of unstoppable killing...."

He interrupted in a shockingly bitter voice. "Sounds just like me and the Neko-ken."

She shouted at him furiously, "Don't say that! That's completely different! You never made an unprovoked attack on people!" Akane struggled to calm herself, then continued.

"The other girls tried fighting them but couldn't even scratch them! You going 'cat' was the only thing that saved our lives. And even with the Neko-ken, it was so close. They nearly KILLED you!"

He shook his head in bewilderment. (What is she talking about? I haven't got a scratch!)

Akane's gaze shifted to the rips and tears in his clothes, places where the monsters' claws had nearly sliced his flesh to the bone. How could he understand if she couldn't?

He opened his mouth to say more but Akane cut him off. "Please Ranma, I know I'm leaving out a lot of details but... I'll tell you about them later. I promise."

Ranma slowly nodded, then mumbled, "Bit of a switch, huh? You're always telling me that it IS all my fault. You... and Ryoga...."

Akane could find nothing to say. It was sad but true. An uncomfortable twinge of guilt made her stare at the floor and mutter defensively, "Well, it usually is...."

He flinched.

"...but not this time," she hastily added.

(Oh, that was smart!) Akane nervously realized that she would have to be very careful about what she said and did. Physically, Ranma seemed okay. But he looked so badly shaken. Akane wasn't sure if she could cope with an emotionally fragile Ranma. She was so used to Ranma being strong....

He clenched his hands, felt the tightness of dried blood on his skin. Ranma shuddered and said, "I can't STAND this. I've got to get this stuff off of me."

"Okay."

Akane stood next to Ranma as they both rose to their feet. Unlocking the door, she unhesitatingly took his hand and led him into the hallway. He froze momentarily as he saw evidence of his earlier dash to Akane's room -- a trail of bloody handprints and footprints leading up the stairs and along the hallway to her door. She gently tugged him forward and pulled him toward the stairwell.

Part 2c: DARKEST FEARS

Nabiki's expression got noticeably grimmer as she listened to the description of Ryoga's and Kuno's physical transformations, Ranma's mental transformation, and the events that followed. Considering what she had seen that morning, she had expected the story to be bad. But it was worse than she could have imagined. It wasn't the sheer violence that bothered her the most, although that was gruesome enough. No, it was the other sorts of details that she found really frightening.

...the messages that 'conveniently' invited the fiancées and Mrs. Saotome to the house...
> <p>

...the message which 'conveniently' got her father and Mr. Saotome OUT of the house....
> <p>

...Kuno and Ryoga showing no surprise at -- or rather, EXPECTING Ranma's sudden panic attack even before they shapeshifted...
> <p>

...and finally, the perfectly timed appearance of that mysterious forcefield around the porch....

On the other hand, Soun and Genma looked as if they couldn't quite believe what they were hearing.

Ukyo said, "Akane managed to keep Ranma from ripping out the yellow tiger's... I mean, Ryoga's throat." She stared down, watching her fingers nervously drawing patterns on the table top.

"But he wouldn't let the rest of us get near him. Only Akane. He just growled and hissed if anybody else approached. His eyes were so... inhuman." Ukyo's voice trailed off and she shivered at the memory.

Nabiki could understand completely. The predatory hunger in Ranma's stare would probably follow her into her nightmares.

Nodoka sat still and quiet, an expression of stony calm on her face. However, Nabiki suspected that it was just a brittle facade.

Shampoo was the one to finish the story in her broken Japanese.

"... then Akane take Ranma into house."

Nabiki murmured to Kasumi, "That's pretty much when you and Father walked in."

In Nabiki's mind, it was interesting that Shampoo's occasional observations proved to be the most useful -- her comments about Ryoga and Kuno's reaction to Ranma's fear, for example.

(Of course, Shampoo's had the opportunity to see the Neko-ken several times before. She and Akane would be the two people best suited to notice any changes in Ranma's 'cat' behavior. Much darker, she said.... But something's going on with Shampoo. I don't know what it is, but I can feel it.)

Nabiki sighed wearily. (I suppose that I should be grateful that at least one person could give me some objective information! As for the other guys.... Ukyo's in a state of denial. Mrs. Saotome's an emotional mess, even though she isn't showing it at the moment. Forget Kodachi. That girl's gone totally bonkers, this time. The only people left are Akane and Ranma. And I doubt Ranma will be able to remember anything. He never does.)

While Nabiki was caught up in her thoughts, Nodoka had turned to her husband. In an icy voice, she said, "Akane told me that Ranma's fear of cats is the result of one of your 'training' exercises, husband. Is that CORRECT?"

Genma rubbed the back of his neck and chuckled feebly. "Well, it's not exactly like...."

Nabiki was not about to let Genma wiggle out of his responsibility for this whole mess. She was just about to explain in exquisite detail about the whole Neko-ken training fiasco when Kasumi looked at Mr. Saotome and cheerfully spoke up.

"Why, Mr. Saotome! Didn't you tell us about giving Ranma some fish

sausage and sending him into a pit full of starving cats when he was six years old?"

Kasumi then turned to Nodoka. "And he kept sending Ranma back into the pit over and over again to feed the hungry little cats with fish cakes, dried sardines, and all sorts of treats. How thoughtful of you to think of the poor cats, Mr. Saotome!" Kasumi gave everyone that vague, pleasant smile of hers and drifted out the room, carrying the tea tray.

Nabiki felt like applauding that masterful performance. (Way to go, Sis!)

Nodoka stared blankly for a moment, then turned on her husband with a vengeance.

"You did WHAT!?"

"Well, I..., " Genma stammered.

Ukyo slammed her hand on the table and snapped, "Ha! What he really did was strap the food on Ranma's body and TOSS him into the pit! Again and again!" She jabbed an angry finger in his direction. "He begged you to stop but you KEPT ON DOING IT!"

Nodoka growled, "Let me understand. You strapped fish sausage to our son and threw him in a pit full of starving cats? And you did it more than once!?" Her hands flexed, as if she was already strangling Genma with her bare hands.

"Well... well... that's what the training manual said!"

"'What the training manual said....' Is that your ONLY excuse!?" Nodoka shouted.

Genma shrugged and muttered, "So I didn't expect the minor... okay, major side effect. It's not MY fault if Ranma's too weak-willed to forget about a few bad experiences!"

The women all glared furiously at him. Even Nabiki was left speechless at this display of sheer gall.

"A... few... BAD... EXPERIENCES!?" Ukyo choked out.

Genma stubbornly continued, "Anyway, the method worked. I mean, Ranma DID actually learn the Neko-ken." His voice turned pompous and self-righteous. "And a true martial artist would happily go through the rigors of hell itself to learn a superb technique like the Cat-fist. Isn't that right, Tendo?"

Soun looked acutely uncomfortable and muttered, "Well... I...."

Nodoka lunged to her feet and hissed in fury, "An adult martial artist may choose to do so, perhaps, but Ranma was only a child! A SIX YEAR OLD CHILD!!!"

With a swift, practiced movement, she whipped out her sword. Grabbing Genma's gi, Nodoka hauled him forward and shouted into his face. "I was such a FOOL to let you take Ranma away from me! Look what you've

done to him! FIRST, I find out you that you managed to get him cursed with a girl's body. THEN, I find out that you've managed to saddle him with unguessed numbers of fiancées. And for what? The sake of your stomach?"

Unnoticed by Nodoka or the other women, the hallway door slid open behind them.

Nodoka relentlessly continued, "And now... NOW I find out that you've managed to turn our son into a murderous, blood-crazed ANIMAL!" She fiercely shook her husband back and forth. "And I was worried about Ranma behaving like a man!?"

Genma babbled, "But Nodoka, the Neko-ken makes Ranma unbeatable! And what harm...." His voice abruptly trailed off. His eyes nearly bulged out of his head as he saw Ranma standing in the doorway. Soun goggled, utterly speechless. Both men had convinced themselves that the women had been exaggerating. Females always exaggerated. However, after seeing the blood all over Ranma, the two men realized that, if anything, the women had understated the morning's events.

Nodoka, still completely unaware of Ranma's presence behind her, shouted, "What harm!? How can you possibly say that!? Haven't you been listening!? He nearly killed both those boys! They could be dead right now for all we know! And what about that Chinese boy called Mousse!? What about Kodachi Kuno!? Don't you realize, if Akane hadn't have been there, he could have easily turned on the rest of us, too!

"And what happens the next time he sees a cat? What happens the next time his mind snaps and Akane isn't around? Is he going to attack or kill some poor innocent bystander who has the bad luck to be in the wrong place at the wrong time!?"

Shampoo leaned over the table and protested in a loud voice. "Ranma no attack without good reason!"

Meanwhile, Ukyo sat frozen during Nodoka's outburst. She was torn between her desire to defend Ranma and her fear that Nodoka was right. After all, she'd seen it herself -- the vicious, predatory THING that existed in Ranma's body just an hour or so ago.

Nabiki had been concentrating on Nodoka and her husband. Then a soft noise caught her attention. She quickly turned to see a white-faced Ranma standing frozen in the doorway. The anguish in his eyes told her that he had heard way too much.

(SHIT!) swore Nabiki. She jumped to her feet and grabbed for Nodoka's arm.

Alerted by Nabiki's abrupt movement, Shampoo and Ukyo both whirled around. They saw Ranma as he stood utterly still, staring blankly at his mother. Akane suddenly peered over Ranma's shoulder with a furious look on her face.

"Ranma!"
> <p>

"Ran-chan!"

The stunned expression on Genma's face and Nabiki's hard jerk on her arm finally penetrated Nodoka's rage. She looked up only to see Akane dragging Ranma out of the room. The door slammed shut behind them.

Nodoka stared blankly at the door for a moment, her sword slipping from her slack fingers. As she finally realized that Ranma must have heard everything, or nearly everything she'd said, Nodoka uttered a horrified whisper.

"No.... I-I-I didn't mean...."

Nabiki wearily rubbed her forehead in a futile attempt to fend off a headache and muttered, "Way to go, people."

Ranma numbly allowed Akane to hustle him away from the living room. As for Akane, she scolded herself furiously. If only she had been paying closer attention.... If she had only acted faster.... She had left him alone for just a moment to grab a few extra towels. But that moment had been more than enough.

(How could his mother say such things!? Doesn't she have any idea what he's going through!?)

Once they were in the changing room outside the bathroom, Ranma slowly began to pull off his shirt. He was oblivious to Akane's presence.

(I can't leave him alone. Not like this.)

Crumpling his torn shirt in his hands, Ranma finally noticed Akane lurking near the door. He blinked, then said in a faintly bewildered voice, "Akane, what are you still doing here?"

"Ranma, I... didn't want to...." She stopped, then frowned at him with a deeply concerned expression on her face.

He vaguely noted that Akane was very, very angry. Angry at what, he didn't know. But for once, she wasn't mad at him. That was all that mattered.

A sad little smile appeared on Ranma's lips. "Don't worry, I'm not going to do anything stupid right now. I just need to get myself cleaned off." His eyes contained a silent plead for a little solitude.

She hesitated, then said, "You promise?"

"...Huh?"

"Do you... promise that you won't do anything stupid... or drastic... if I leave you alone?"

"Akane, I just... need to take a bath," he said quietly.

"Promise me! Or I'm not budging!" There was fierce determination in her voice.

He took a deep breath. "I promise I won't do anything stupid. Or drastic. Okay?"

Akane nodded slowly and whispered, "Okay." She left the changing room, gently closing the door behind her. A few deep breaths and she stalked back toward the living room. And Nodoka.

Ukyo's first impulse -- to go after Ranma -- was blocked by Shampoo, of all people. The Amazon adamantly refused to allow Ukyo to leave the room.

Finally, Ukyo shouted, "Damn it, you hussy, get the hell out of my way!"

"No." Shampoo folded her arms and did an excellent imitation of the Great Wall of China.

Ukyo glared at the Amazon girl. "What's with you? Don't tell me you're just going to leave him to Akane's tender mercies?"

Nabiki said, "I think Ranma has more than enough to deal with at the moment. And he's certainly in no shape to deal with his usual fiancée problem."

Turning on the middle Tendo daughter, Ukyo snapped, "This has nothing to do with that! Don't you get it? Ran-chan really needs someone to talk to and Akane's just not the understanding type! You KNOW how she treats him. Do you really think that Akane's up to taking care of Ranma right now?"

"At least Akane better than spatula girl! She not scared of him!"

Ukyo glared at the Amazon. "What do you mean by that crack?"

"Shampoo can tell spatula girl scared of Ranma and Neko-ken. Spatula girl also upset Ranma-cat no care for her. Scared and jealous girl no good for Ranma right now."

"That's... that's not true!"

Shampoo sniffed in disbelief.

"Why you...."

Nabiki quickly cut in, "Ladies, this is not the time, nor the place, for this sort of discussion."

Ukyo could tell that Shampoo was not about to let her leave. And without her battle spatula, her chances of forcibly moving the Amazon were not good. Badly frustrated, she turned on the other only available target for her wrath -- Ranma's mother. Genma, the cunning old bastard, had long since fled the living room and his irate wife. Before the chef could start yelling at Nodoka, the door slammed open.

Akane stormed into the room. She stood, gasping for air, before

shouting, "How could you say that!? Do you have ANY idea how upset he was when he woke up just now!? When he saw all that blood and thought that he might have hurt you? Or Ukyo? Or Shampoo? And then, to hear his OWN mother calling him a 'murderous, blood-crazed animal'!"

Her voice shook in fury. "He's your SON! Do you have any idea how much he cares about you? About what you think of him!? And to find out that his own mother is scared of him!

"Kuno and Ryoga got hurt because they were trying to kill him! And he could have hurt Mousse and Kodachi if he really wanted to! But he didn't!"

Nodoka whispered miserably, "If he had only told me about this earlier...."

"What was he supposed to do!? Tell you, 'Oh, by the way, Mother, not only do I turn into a girl when I get wet but sometimes I go crazy and think I'm a cat'!? With all the fuss you've been making about being MANLY?"

Nodoka cried, "That would have been the honorable thing to do! I try to make allowances for Ranma's upbringing, but this is the SECOND time that something like this has happened! He should have told me about his Jusenkyo curse when we first met. Instead, he tried to trick me into thinking he was Ranko! And now I find out that he's been hiding this... this horrible madness from me all along!"

"You mean to tell me that you consider Ranma a dishonorable person because he didn't want to tell you about his curse? And about the Neko-ken?" Akane clenched her fists and yelled, "He was SCARED to tell you! With the way you keep waving that sword around, who wouldn't be scared!?"

Soun sputtered, "Akane!"

In an anguished voice, Nodoka said, "My son was supposed to become a man among men. But after all these years, what do I find? Someone who's constantly trying to deceive me. And to have him end up like THIS -- part boy, part girl, AND part animal...."

Akane shouted back, "I don't CARE what Ranma is! What's important is that he's just as honorable as you are -- if not more so! Considering how his father behaves, you should be grateful he has any sense of honor at all! Ranma may do some stupid things but he keeps his word, no matter how much it costs him!"

Nabiki was surprised to see her father making a barely noticeable nod of agreement. In the meantime, Akane continued in her tirade.

"Regardless of what you seem to think, Ranma does NOT like hurting people, not even his enemies! And I can't count the number of times he's risked his own life trying protect others! If you've managed to convince him that he's a danger to everyone, you're going to find out just how honorable that idiot can be!"

Nabiki's calm, even voice said, "Akane? Where IS Ranma?"

Akane, still quivering in barely controlled rage, muttered, "He's

taking a bath."

Ukyo had been stunned by Akane's emotional outburst. She hadn't expected her rival to understand Ranma so well. However, Akane's last statement shook the chef out of her brief daze.

"And you left him alone!?" Ukyo shouted.

"He promised that he won't do anything stupid. For the moment." Akane glared at Nodoka. "Unlike SOME people, I believe in his honor."

Akane was about say more, but Kasumi suddenly appeared behind her. In a gentle but firm voice, she said, "Akane, you must be tired. You should go to your room and rest."

Akane looked up at her oldest sister. There was quiet determination and concern in Kasumi's eyes. Akane give Nodoka one last furious look before storming off to her room.

Kasumi turned her attention to Ukyo and Shampoo. In a placid voice, she said, "Well, Ranma will probably need quite a lot of rest after all that excitement. Why don't you drop by tomorrow and see how he's doing." It was a perfectly pleasant, but unmistakable, dismissal.

Before Ukyo could object, Kasumi had ushered her and Shampoo out of the living room, through the house, and onto the front porch. The eldest Tendo daughter murmured a polite goodbye and closed the front door in their faces.

Ukyo briefly thought about sneaking back into the house to see Ranma. However, Shampoo's grim expression warned her not to try it. She gritted her teeth and stalked back to her restaurant, followed by Shampoo.

(Everyone in that damned household seems to be trying to keep me away from Ran-chan. It's a bloody conspiracy! And what's with that stupid Amazon?)

It was times like these that Ukyo really felt alone. Akane had everything -- plenty of friends, a supportive family. She even had Ran-chan living with her.

And what did Ukyo Kuonji have, aside from an estranged father who would barely look at her and relatives whom Ukyo hadn't seen for years? Not much. She did have a few casual friends in Nerima but they were all connected to Ranma or the Tendos somehow. She really couldn't confide in any of them, especially about Ranma.

He was HER fiance, but nobody cared. Nodoka Saotome was the only person in Nerima who took her claim seriously. And at the moment, the chef positively hated the woman for hurting Ranma -- and for expressing Ukyo's own fears.

Now it seemed that even Shampoo was now on Akane's side.

> <p>

Back in the living room, Nodoka slowly retrieved her fallen sword and slipped it back into its sheath. Remaining on her knees, she turned to face Soun and bowed very low.

Soun babbled nervously, "I hope you'll forgive Akane for her outburst. She's so young and she loses her temper so easily. I'm sure she didn't really mean to...."

"No, please forgive ME for bringing such disharmony into your household. This incident was entirely my fault. Akane wouldn't have been so upset if I hadn't completely forgotten my manners and started that argument with my husband. And she was quite correct that my first concern should have been Ranma, not my own feelings."

She paused, then added, "I think it would be best if Genma and I go back to my house. I don't want to distress Ranma any further. There are also some other issues that Genma and I must discuss immediately."

Her fingers worried at the fabric of her kimono. "Ranma probably has no desire to see me at the moment. But please tell him that... I'm very sorry for what I said and I didn't mean to...." She gestured vaguely. "And could you also please tell him that I would like the opportunity to discuss this and other matters with him soon?"

Her last words appeared to be directed to both Soun and Nabiki.

Nabiki merely nodded while her father said, "Of course, Nodoka."

Ranma's mother rose to her feet and stepped out onto the porch. Gazing around the yard, she said in a very firm voice, "Genma, I know you're around here. Don't make me go looking for you."

Genma sheepishly emerged from a nearby mass of shrubbery and stood nervously in front of his wife. Nodoka bowed to the Tendos, then turned to leave. Her husband reluctantly followed.

After Akane reluctantly left him alone in the changing room, Ranma began stripping off the rest of his clothes. He dumped them haphazardly on the floor as he slowly made his way toward the inner bathroom.

As soon as he closed the door, the churning nausea that he'd been suppressing finally got the better of him. Ranma collapsed to his knees and threw up. When there was nothing left in his stomach, he opened his eyes briefly.

(Oh shit....)

Quickly closing his eyes, Ranma blindly groped for the faucet and let the steaming hot water rinse the dark reddish brown mess down the drain.

He then sagged to the tiled floor and allowed the water pour all over him. Ranma numbly watched as the pinkish waste water drained away. The blood had soaked everywhere, even into his pigtail. He yanked the

braid loose and began to scrub himself from head to toe, over and over again.

Part 2d: DEBTS AND OBLIGATIONS

Kasumi returned to the living room to see Nabiki walking toward the bathroom. She called out to her younger sister, "Where are you going?"

"I just wanted to check up on Ranma."

Kasumi murmured, "I see," and disappeared into the kitchen.

As she slowly walked toward the back of the house, Nabiki thought about Ranma's probable state of mind. From her brief glimpse of him, she knew that she would probably be facing a person drowning in an emotional morass of horror, guilt, and fear.

Unfortunately, Akane was quite right. Ranma, for all his faults, was an excessively honorable sort of person. If he considered himself to be a danger to his family and friends, there was no telling what kind of stupidly noble measures he might take. Running away from Nerima and suicide were both likely options.

A part of her asked, (Why not let him do it? Why even bother?)

However, Nabiki had two very good reasons for getting involved. (For one thing, if my instincts are right, serious trouble's brewing. We're going to need Ranma.)

There was no question that Ranma was one hell of a trouble magnet. Most of the turmoil inflicted on the Tendo family could be traced either directly or indirectly back to him. But it was equally undeniable that Ranma was usually instrumental in getting everybody OUT of trouble, too... often at risk to his own life.

As for the second reason....

(Nabiki, just admit it. You hate to see Ranma agonizing over something that really isn't his fault. He might be the cause but that doesn't mean that he should take all the blame for what's happened.)

Stepping into the changing room, Nabiki noticed Ranma's clothes lying all over the floor. She gingerly picked up his blood-stained shirt and carefully noted the tears and holes, matching them in her mind with the story that Nodoka and the fiancées told. Yes, there was the shoulder, the hip....

She shivered as she slid her middle finger through one of the gaping holes in his shirt. Nabiki tried to visualize the size of the claw that made the hole.

(Has to be longer than my finger. Claws like knives....)

Nabiki frowned as she subjected the pants to an equally thorough inspection. It was pretty clear that Ranma had been badly hurt during the fight. But aside from the obvious emotional trauma, he looked perfectly healthy. She put aside the puzzle for the moment.

(I need to find that old Neko-ken training manual of Mr. Saotome's. Maybe there'll be some clues about what's going on with Ranma.)

Nabiki paused in front of the sliding door leading to the inner bathroom. She took a moment to center herself, much like a fighter preparing for a duel. In a way, she doing exactly that.

(Here it goes.) She briskly slid open the door without knocking.

Ranma sat hunched in the bathtub, blankly staring down at the water. She almost didn't recognize him with his hair unbraided and hanging loose around his face and shoulders. The click of the door sliding shut finally caught his attention. He slowly lifted his head to look at her.

She controlled her impulse to retreat in the face of the quiet desolation in his eyes. Nabiki could clearly see moist streaks running down Ranma's face. They could have been bathwater from his wet hair. They could have been tears. They could have been both.

Ranma barely reacted to her intrusion. Perhaps he couldn't summon up the energy to be outraged at the invasion of privacy. He simply looked at her and waited in stoic silence for her to do her worst.

"How do you feel?" she said calmly.

He looked away. How could he describe it? In heart and mind, he felt terrible -- battered to the absolute edge of endurance. He was sickened, scared....

And yet, physically, he felt pretty good. No, that wasn't right. He felt GREAT. Actually, he had never felt quite so... alive. There was an eerie sense of completion, like the last piece of a puzzle finally sliding into place.

(What the hell am I thinking?) He quickly buried the disturbing thought in a distant corner of his brain and tried his best to forget it.

"Okay," he muttered.

"Do you know what happened? Did Akane tell you anything?"

"A bit. I probably know less than you do."

Nabiki frowned slightly.

A faintly bitter smile crossed his face. "I don't remember anything when I go 'cat', you know."

She gave him a hard stare. "So, what do you recall?"

"Facing off against Kuno and Ryoga," was Ranma's terse reply.

"Ah." She paused, then said, "Do you want to know what happened?"

He hesitated, then nodded sharply.

In a flat voice, she said, "You suddenly started acting absolutely terrified of Kuno and Ryoga. For some reason, you seemed to think that they were cats. The guys then transformed to giant tigers. You ended up huddled up on the porch moaning and quivering in fear. When the guys came after you, the girls tried to drive them off. They failed. Shampoo managed to wound Kuno but those tiger forms had incredible healing abilities. Everyone ended up trapped on the front porch. They were boxed in by the tigers and by some sort of invisible forcefield cage. You then went 'cat' as you call it. But because of their healing ability, you didn't have any better luck stopping Kuno and Ryoga than the girls did."

That got a slight reaction out of Ranma. He stiffened and sat up a bit straighter in the tub.

Nabiki continued, "That's right. In their tiger forms, Kuno and Ryoga just shrugged off your Cat-fist attacks. However, you weren't as lucky. They ripped you up pretty badly."

Ranma gave Nabiki a decidedly curious look.

"Then how did I...?"

"Well, when Ryoga suddenly turned on Akane and the others, you tried to stop him. Kuno pounced and really dug his claws into you. Suddenly, you somehow generated an incredibly powerful cat-shaped battle aura and took both the guys down in no time flat."

"How?"

Nabiki's voice was still perfectly calm as she said, "You slammed Kuno into a tree -- broke both the tree and Kuno. Then you slashed up Ryoga's face and disembowelled him."

Ranma clenched his teeth and shuddered, fighting down a surge of nausea.

"After they both collapsed, Kuno and Ryoga changed back into human form."

She paused and he glanced up at her.

Nabiki's voice softened slightly. "It seems that their tiger forms somehow managed to absorb most of the damage. The physical injuries on the human forms weren't nearly as bad as the injuries on the tiger forms."

Ranma sagged back against the side of the tub and heaved a great sigh of relief.

(Those two idiots better be okay.)

"You want to hear the rest of it?"

He looked up sharply at Nabiki. Her grim expression warned Ranma that the story was by no means finished.

He shivered. "There's... more?"

She nodded sharply.

Ranma thought back to his mother's words. (Didn't she say something about Mousse and Kodachi? Oh please, no....) Part of him desperately wanted to tell Nabiki to stop but another part knew that he had to learn the worst.

He took a deep breath. "Yeah. Let's hear it."

"Ryoga and Kuno were both wounded and unconscious, but you apparently weren't satisfied with that. You tried to finish off Ryoga. Akane had to literally stick her hand in your mouth to keep you from ripping his throat out."

His eyes widened in shock.

"And when Mousse showed up spouting his usual stuff about Shampoo, you tried to attack him, too." There was a subtle change in her voice. Previously, it had been completely calm but now there was a faintest trace of emotion. What kind of emotion, Ranma couldn't quite figure out.

She added, "I walked in at the wrong time. If it hadn't have been for Shampoo knocking me out of your way, well...." She shrugged.

He winced. (Yeah, I can guess what might have happened.)

"Did I.... Mousse?"

"Shampoo threw Mousse out into the street and made him leave. She and Akane managed to keep you from chasing after him."

Ranma didn't relax one bit. "And... Kodachi?"

Nabiki sighed wearily.

"What did I do to her!?"

"You didn't do anything. It seems that seeing you in your cat-mode only made Kodachi more... interested in you."

That was apparently the last thing Ranma expected to hear. He looked utterly horrified.

"She's more WHAT!?"

"Let's face it Ranma, Kodachi's always had a thing about power and strength. That's one of the reasons she's so obsessed with you. And this morning, you were more powerful and stronger than ever before." Nabiki shrugged. "I guess she found it quite exciting."

"But... but... I was acting like a... c-c-cat! A CRAZY one, at that!"

She raised a skeptical eyebrow. "You think a minor detail like that will bother Kodachi? I'm sure all that 'primal' ferocity just makes you more desirable to her."

Ranma dropped his head into his hands and groaned softly. "I think I'm gonna be sick...."

"Well, your cat side seemed to feel pretty much the same way. You threatened to attack her when she tried to cuddle up to you."

There was a trace of humor in Nabiki's voice. "Of course, you weren't too happy about her attempt to attack Akane, either, so you had plenty of provocation. Fortunately, your mother managed to stop Kodachi long enough for Akane to take you into the house."

She gave him a long look. "But all joking aside, if her behavior this morning is any indication, Kodachi's going to become a REAL problem. Much more than before."

Ranma was silent for a long moment, then said tentatively, "Shampoo and Ukyo both looked okay...."

"Shampoo's fine. You might be pleasantly surprised at her new attitude the next time you see her."

She paused briefly. "As for Ukyo, she seems to be having some real problems dealing with what you did. Unlike Shampoo, she's never seen you use the Neko-ken before, so she was understandably... horrified by what happened this morning."

"I... see."

(First, my mom. And now Uc-chan....)

He stared down at the water. She took advantage of his distracted state to move closer. When she lifted his long black hair away from his body, Nabiki could only see the faintest trace of scratch marks on his shoulder. And on his back, there were several reddish marks that could easily be insect bites or bruises.

She thought, (Incredible. His injuries are nearly gone.)

Ranma said, "Then... Ryoga and Kuno.... Mousse and Kodachi...."

"Ryoga's and Kuno's physical injuries don't appear to be life-threatening, but there could be other complications. As for Mousse and Kodachi, you didn't touch them."

"But my mother said...." He could still hear his mother's voice shouting, 'a murderous, blood-crazed ANIMAL!'. "

Nabiki quietly said, "Ranma, you have to remember that like Ukyo, your mother's never seen you in your 'cat-mode' so what happened this morning was a tremendous shock to her. She simply got carried away by all the stress and her argument with your father. Your mother certainly didn't mean for you to hear any of it. And I'm not putting words into her mouth, either. She specifically wanted you to know that she's sorry about what she said."

Ranma's face was still. He seemed oddly unmoved by Nodoka's expression of remorse. Instead, he simply said, "Okay. Where is she now?"

"Your mother and father went back to her house to finish their little discussion. She wants to talk you later, though."

Ranma sighed quietly, then went back to staring morosely at the water. He thought, (Well, now I have a pretty good idea how Mom... Mother REALLY feels about me and the Neko-ken.)

Aloud, he murmured, "But she's right, you know."

"Meaning?" Nabiki casually asked.

"Mother was right." His voice became tense, sharp. "Don't you get it? Maybe I didn't kill Ryoga and Kuno. THIS time. Maybe I didn't hurt anyone else. THIS time. But it was all just dumb luck. What would've happened if Akane hadn't have been there? What if she or Shampoo had been a bit slower? What if this happens again?"

"You don't know that it will."

"I can't be certain that it won't. Damn it, Nabiki. How can you, of all people, just ignore this?"

"I'm not ignoring it. But before you make any momentous decisions, I want to make sure you understand the full scope of the problem."

"Huh?"

"Ranma, what happened this morning was no accident."

He blinked to hear the carefully controlled anger in her voice.

"You were SET UP. Someone deliberately arranged this whole miserable scenario. And the person -- or persons -- who planned it know way too much about you and everybody else around here."

He started to shake his head. "That doesn't...."

Nabiki ruthlessly interrupted him. "LISTEN TO ME. After the last two years, I can accept quite a lot as coincidence. I suppose I could accept the idea of Kuno and Ryoga both picking up the same weird shapeshifting magic. I suppose I could accept the idea of those idiots working together."

She shrugged. "Transforming into monsters which just HAPPEN to be the one thing you're terrified of and which just HAPPEN to be able to stand up to the Neko-ken -- well, we've all seen weirder things occur around here."

She suddenly leaned forward. "But the messages are a completely different matter."

Ranma blinked. (Of course. The messages....)

"Someone took the trouble to send those notes to your mother and your fiancées in order to get them here at just the right time. Someone also sent a note to our fathers getting them OUT of the house at just the right time. Somehow, I can't see Ryoga or Kuno coming up with such a complicated scheme. At least, not on their own. And why would they bother? They don't give a damn about your mother, Shampoo, or Ukyo. And let's face it, our fathers' presence has never bothered Kuno and Ryoga before."

Ranma nodded slowly.

"Those two certainly couldn't have managed that thing with the forcefields on the porch. I wouldn't be the least bit surprised if our mysterious enemy -- he, she, it, they, whatever -- started that crazy 'secret wedding' rumor just to provoke Kuno and Ryoga into challenging you."

Ranma's eyes began to narrow ominously as he began to realize what she was getting at. He chuckled bitterly. "There's a mysterious enemy out to get me. So what's new?"

"Plenty," Nabiki said curtly. "This time's very different. This enemy isn't out to challenge and defeat you, Ranma. This enemy isn't interested in simply killing you, either. No, I suspect this person has something much worse in store for you."

"Which is?"

"I don't know. We won't know what this guy wants until we find out why he's doing all this."

(It has to involve the Neko-ken somehow. I'm sure of it. But what's the connection?) Nabiki had no answers, only a lot of unpleasant speculations.

In a bleak voice, Ranma said, "This mess is my fault. It's because of me that Akane, you, and the others are mixed up in all this. Damn it, I should know better by now! As long as I'm here, it'll never stop."

"Ranma, I know what you are thinking about. But you won't do anything for Akane, the rest of us, or yourself any favors by running away from this mess...."

Nabiki watched him carefully. (Don't disappoint me, Ranma.)

He snapped, "What kinda coward do you think I am! Do you really think that I'd just desert Akane and the rest of you guys with this wacko running around loose!? As if this enemy of mine will leave you guys alone even if I did leave."

(I'm glad that I haven't misjudged you completely,) she thought, suppressing a smile.

Aloud, Nabiki said, "Then I hope you can apply that very same reasoning to the idea of killing yourself."

He twitched guiltily. "What are you talking about?"

"Ranma, I'm not stupid." Nabiki gave him a long, meaningful look. "I

haven't hung around martial artists all my life without picking up 'The Code'. Suicide, however you do it, is just the type of thing a 'honorable' martial artist would consider doing in a situation like this. You know, trying to spare us weaker mortals from dread peril and all that crap. Well, I don't think that's going to work. Not this time."

"...."

Ranma looked a bit stunned at the scorn in Nabiki's voice. He hesitated, then whispered quietly, "But it would solve a lot of problems. The Neko-ken, this mysterious enemy... a lot of things."

"Maybe it will. But maybe it won't. Considering all the trouble this enemy's gone through, killing yourself could just make the guy mad."

He clenched his fists. (Shit! If she's right, this bastard's got a real cruel streak. There's no telling what this guy'll do if he feels 'cheated'. He could go after Akane and the others....)

"Ranma, I'm not saying that I don't believe in sacrifice. Or an honorable death. Everybody makes sacrifices, one way or another. But it shouldn't be some knee-jerk reflex. A person needs to pick the right time and the right reason. Otherwise, it's just a big waste."

"And in my humble opinion, now is not the right time. There's too many unanswered questions." Nabiki sighed heavily and propped her hip on the rim of the tub.

"The point I'm trying to make is that everyone is a lot better off if you're here AND alive. Regardless of how this trouble started, we're all in this together. The family NEEDS you. The first priority should be to find and get rid of this mysterious enemy. Someone like that is NOT going to just go away. As for what happened this morning with the Neko-ken... well, we'll worry about it IF it becomes a problem."

Ranma was very still, then said softly, "You've got it all worked out, haven't you? But tell me. What if I become more of a danger than this... this enemy?" He gave her a hard stare.

She calmly met his eyes. "I'll deal with it if I have to. One way or another."

Something told him that Nabiki would do whatever was necessary to protect Akane and the others. That was fine with him.

Ranma and Nabiki looked at each other in a brief moment of perfect agreement, then he gave her a faint grin. It wasn't his usual cocky expression but it was infinitely better than the fear and despair she had seen earlier.

"Okay, you made your point, Nabiki. You'll get what you want. As usual."

She shrugged and got up to leave. "I'm just doing my best to keep Akane and the family from getting hurt."

"Yeah. I know." He sighed quietly. "Well, it's nice to know that I can be of some use around here."

Nabiki froze with her hand on the door. She spoke without turning around to look at him. Her voice was cool and perfectly even.

"Listen to me, Ranma. When I said that we were all in this together, I meant it. You're part of this family, too. And I did NOT spend all this effort trying to drag you out of the pit of despair just because I think you're USEFUL."

With those words, she walked out of the bathroom. The door quietly slid shut behind her.

Ranma stared at the closed door, a stunned expression on his face.

"Nabiki...."

> (end of Part 2) <p>

Author's Notes:

Tentatively scheduled for upcoming sections of Tiger Claw...

Part 3 - A bit more damage control. Shampoo tries to put her foot down with Cologne but an old acquaintance interferes with the best intentions. Ukyo has a painful nighttime encounter and makes a new friend. Ebon finally makes his presence known. Sinister things are definitely in the works. More than one person is going to have a VERY BAD night.

^_-

> CREDITS: <p>

Additional inspiration from:

"The Whisper" by Queensryche

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> REJAR by Dara Joy. <p>

Additional fanfic mentions: ^_^

"Hearts of Ice" by Krista Perry and "Nekophobia" by David Eddy for starting my obsessive interest in the neko-stuff.

Many thanks to my pre-readers, for their suggestions, critiques, and support. ^_^

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> ----- <p>

3. Part 3

> <meta name="generator"> Ranma 1/2 - Tiger Claw (part
3)

> TIGER CLAW
 Part 3: HARBINGERS OF THE STORM
> ----- <p>

A Ranma 1/2 fanfic by Madamhydra@aol.com

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> IMPORTANT NOTE:

This is a continuation/ALTERNATE REALITY fanfic. While the story follows the manga (and video) continuity to just after Mount Phoenix (volume 38), the subsequent wedding ceremony (and the related bombing by Shampoo and Ukyo) does NOT occur. In this story, a different incident involving the planned wedding took place.
> <p>

Only a limited number of the main characters have actually SEEN the Neko-ken (the Tendos, Genma, Shampoo, Cologne, Gosunkugi or Sasuke, and Kuno), although others may have heard rumors about it.

> Text Conventions

() and / / - thoughts
> <p>

- sound fx
> <p>

" " - Chinese
> <p>

Curse forms are denoted by appropriate suffixes (-chan, -neko, -panda, etc.) except for Ryoga (P-chan) and Mousse (Muu-Muu).

> Part 3a: THE GAMES PEOPLE PLAY

After she left a bewildered Ranma alone in the bathroom, Nabiki leaned against the wall and took a few deep breaths. She felt as if she'd been tapdancing through a minefield -- a nerve-wracking exercise but wonderfully exhilarating all the same. She had won this round, at least. Admittedly, she HAD swore off playing games with Ranma's life, but she couldn't suppress a satisfied smirk. Even the terribly high stakes -- Ranma's mental and emotional well-being, Akane's happiness -- could do nothing to spoil the taste of victory for Nabiki.

She shook herself. There was so much left to do.

Retrieving Kuno's sword from the living room, she paused a moment or two to admire the exquisite craftsmanship that had gone into the weapon. A treasure, indeed. Against the background of the black lacquer scabbard, she could pick out a subtle, shimmering pattern of silvery lines that reminded her of lightning bolts. The design was echoed in the blade itself as Nabiki pulled it partially out of its sheath.

The weapon was without a doubt the Kuno family's most prized possession. Nabiki had no intention of returning it -- not yet, at least. When the time came to settle matters with Kuno, she wanted every bit of leverage she could get. The sword would be an important bargaining chip, an ace in the hole. If Kuno wanted his precious little toy back, he was going to have to accept her terms.

However, the situation would be entirely different if he died. Nabiki had no idea just how important the honor blade was to the elder Kuno or Kodachi. They could consider it a mere historical curio. Another thing to check on.

Nabiki carefully hid the sword, then went to make a few phone calls.

As she rested from her magical exertions, Yonoko kept track of the various conversations and confrontations going on within the Tendo household.

There was nothing remotely magical about Yonoko's eavesdropping. She actually preferred to use technology under these circumstances. Skilled martial artists often developed a 'danger sense' or a sensitivity to magic. She didn't want to risk being prematurely detected by Ranma or the other martial artists around Nerima. Yonoko had simply arranged for one of the many repairmen who constantly tramped in and out of the Tendo dojo to tap into Nabiki Tendo's personal surveillance network.

Yonoko shook her head ruefully. It was absolutely amazing. That girl had somehow managed to squirrel away a microphone into virtually every room in the house. Yonoko could easily think of many reasons why a person would want to spy on his or her own family. For example, Yonoko and her twin sister had loathed each other with a passion. Constant surveillance on her sibling had been absolutely necessary for survival. But there was nothing in the Tendo family's relationships that would seem to warrant such extreme measures. And Nabiki Tendo didn't seem to be the voyeuristic sort. It remained a mystery to Yonoko but that didn't stop her from happily taking advantage of Nabiki's meticulous work.

As she idly skipped from one conversation to another, she abruptly sensed a familiar presence manifesting nearby.

"That Nabiki has potential. And while not the beauty in the family, she's not without her own unique charm." The voice that spoke was dark, warm, and velvety. It also contained just a hint of a beguiling purr.

Yonoko replied, "Yes, it's a pity that we couldn't utilize her more."

"She hides it well, but she's very devoted to her family. She would never knowingly do anything to really harm them."

The sorceress glanced over to a corner of the room. Previously empty, it was now occupied by a dark, formless mass of shadow. All that could be clearly seen were two softly glowing smoke-blue 'eyes' and the occasional gleam of white, razor sharp fangs.

"Lord Ebon." Yonoko gave the shadowy mass a respectful nod.

The darkness seethed slightly. "No need to be so formal, my dear Yonoko." It paused to listen to the heated words between Akane and Ranma's mother.

"So. I see that Nodoka is as stiff-necked and stubborn as ever. Considering her bloodlines, I should have expected no less. A sense of honor has its place but inflexibility will cost her dearly. By the way, a most excellent performance this morning."

"Thank you, but I found it a rather nerve-wracking experience. If Saotome had failed...."

"Oh, I was quite certain that Ranma would indeed be able to perform the greater Neko-ken. But to see it done with such flair... now THAT was an unexpected bonus." Ebon's voice sounded vastly amused.

"To be frank, that battle aura scared the hell out of me. I simply didn't expect it to be so powerful. You TOLD me to dump the spells on

Kuno and Hibiki as soon as the aura manifested but I didn't. That was really stupid of me." Yonoko flushed with embarrassment.

"It's not that bad. You're just a competitive person. People like you are driven to measure their strength against formidable opponents. It's only natural to be curious how your own abilities stack up against something as powerful as the Neko-ken."

She sighed wearily. "Well, I certainly paid for my curiosity."

"Will you be able to handle your part tonight?"

"Oh yes. It won't be too demanding, magically speaking, and the physical activity will be fairly easy. A little rest and I'll be fine."

"Then everything should proceed according to plan. And Cologne?"

"I've already made the arrangements as you suggested. It took some time to track the woman down. But she was easy to persuade." Yonoko grinned. "It's nice to have an unlimited budget to work with."

The shadowy mass that was Ebon chuckled softly.

Yonoko paused, then said, "All right. Now that we know that Saotome's capable of mastering the Neko-ken, what about his Jusenkyo curse? You said that his female form might be a problem."

"Not a major problem, but the female form is significantly disadvantaged in reach and strength. That was very clear from his first formal duel with Mousse."

"But she IS noticeably faster than Ranma's male form."

Long white fangs flashed as Ebon grinned. "Not anymore. But that's not the main reason I dislike his current female form."

Yonoko raised a curious eyebrow.

Ebon serenely said, "I dislike the color red...."

She raised her other eyebrow.

"....and I loathe cuteness."

Yonoko blinked, then laughed merrily. "I can imagine your reaction to seeing Azusa...."

"...Shiratori?" Ebon made an audible snort of distaste.

The conspirators sat in companionable silence for several minutes, then Yonoko said, "Forgive me for saying so, but isn't this a rather roundabout way to controlling Saotome? I know that his willpower and stubbornness would make him a very difficult subject, but surely a good, solid mind-control spell would still be much simpler."

"You're quite correct, Yonoko -- if I wanted a puppet or a mindless

flunky. But puppets and flunkies are notoriously dull and stupid. And they need so much constant supervision." Ebon sounded a bit miffed, then continued in a calmer voice.

"Yonoko, I'm afraid your childhood training is showing. If something doesn't do what you want, your instinctive reaction is to brain-blast it into submission."

Ebon sighed. "Now that approach may work in most situations, but not this time. The true Neko-ken and conventional methods of magical coercion do NOT mix. It's quick but painful suicide."

Yonoko asked, "Then how do you expect to control him? Saotome's notoriously obstinate and willful...."

"You mean he's mule-headed."

"Well, yes. Unless you plan on using the Tendo girl as leverage...."

"Akane?" The shadow swayed back and forth as if shaking its head. "There you go again, my dear. We don't want to send him off the deep end. No, we're going to keep this on an entirely business-like basis. An exchange of...favors. Nabiki would understand perfectly."

"Really? And the purpose of all this intricate plotting, then?" Yonoko sounded just a tiny bit exasperated. "If you want to keep this business-like, why not just make Saotome an offer he can't refuse?"

Ebon uttered a soft, rumbling chuckle. "Unfortunately, Ranma simply isn't good enough right now. He needs more training and more practice."

Yonoko snorted. "Oh, so we get saddled with that job?"

"Naturally. If you want something done right, it's best to handle it yourself. Or at least supervise. Now, I've got all the time in the world, but do YOU really want to spend the next few years waiting around for Ranma to acquire the necessary skills by sheer luck and chance?"

She grimaced. "No, I don't."

"In spite of his many faults, Genma Saotome did quite a good job of training Ranma in the martial arts. And the constant turmoil in the boy's life has only served to improve those skills. But with all that, Ranma is still an unsharpened blade. He's capable of doing damage but is nowhere close to his full potential. And what do you do with a dull sword?"

Ebon gave Yonoko a vicious little grin before answering its own question.

"You hone its edge."

"It's not going to be easy on him." Yonoko's voice was utterly dispassionate, devoid of any sympathy.

The shadowy mass in the corner shrugged nonchalantly. "Nothing worthwhile is ever easy. Or as humans often say, 'No pain, no gain.'"

Her voice turned thoughtful. "I've always wondered. If a sword were alive, would it suffer as it was being sharpened -- as bits of itself are scraped and scoured away? Or would it feel pleasure at being prepared for its true purpose?"

Ebon shrugged again. "His feelings are quite irrelevant. Ranma will be schooled to his full potential, even if I have to drag him kicking and screaming."

The mass of darkness started to boil and seethe.

It said, "Luck to you, my dear Yonoko." Ebon then vanished, leaving a weary sorceress alone with her thoughts.

> Part 3b: PICKING UP THE PIECES

....mine...mine...MINE....

Water sloshed as Ranma sat bolt upright in the tub and stared around in confusion. He must have dozed off after Nabiki left, but he had no idea what had jerked him awake. There was only the faintest recollection of some profoundly disturbing feeling.

He took a few gulps of air. (Calm down. Kuno and Ryoga are only wounded. Nabiki said that I didn't hurt anyone else... unless I imagined it.... That's crazy! I couldn't have dreamed up that whole talk with Nabiki... could I?)

The more he thought about it, the more dreamlike the conversation with Nabiki became. Finally, unable to stand the uncertainty, he quickly hauled himself out of the tub. Stepping into the changing room, he thankfully noticed his bloody clothes were gone. He pulled a spare outfit out of a hamper, got dressed, and stepped into the hallway.

The Tendo house was eerily quiet. Ranma peeked through the open door to the living room. Empty. The kitchen was also unoccupied.

(Where is everyone?)

Ranma enjoyed solitude, probably because he got so little of it. But at the moment, he felt a strangely desperate need for company. Anybody. He would almost welcome Kodachi's presence right now.

Perhaps it HAD been a dream. Maybe he had only imagined that difficult but unexpectedly candid talk with Nabiki. Ranma had a horrific vision of wandering through a deserted house only to come across a roomful of bloody corpses....

He shook his head hard. (Man, I've gotta get a grip on myself!)

At that moment, Ranma heard a faint, metallic clatter. And someone was humming an old folk song. Ranma eagerly followed the sounds to the open front door.

He took a deep breath, then peeked outside only to see Kasumi. She was quietly humming to herself as she mopped the encrusted blood off the stone walkway. The familiar, everyday sight of her cleaning away made a jarring contrast with the gore and chaotic destruction surrounding her.

"Uh...."

She looked up and gave him a kindly smile. "Ranma, you're looking so much better." Her voice was even softer than usual.

Ranma nervously rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah, thanks. Um, where is everybody?"

"Father's resting in his room."

Ranma assumed that meant that Soun was hiding under his bedcovers, moaning and weeping.

"Nabiki's talking to some friends."

Translation? She was wheeling and dealing with business associates.

"And Akane's taking a nap."

Ranma's eyes widened in alarm. "She's... she's okay, isn't she?"

"Oh yes. She's just a bit worn out by all the excitement." Kasumi cocked her head slightly. "How about you? Aren't you a little tired?"

"No. I'm...fine." He looked around restlessly. Finally, he headed toward the street but Kasumi's soft voice made him pause.

"Ranma, I called the hospital just now."

He spun around and stared at her. She looked at him thoughtfully as he stood there, pale and tense, braced for the worst possible news. In a strangled voice, he whispered, "Are they...?"

Kasumi blinked and said in mild surprise, "The receptionist told me that Ryoga and Kuno are alive and stable at the moment, but she also said that visitors were out of the question."

"Didn't she say anything else?" Ranma was desperate for details.

"No." She added a bit wistfully, "She won't let me talk to Dr. Tofu. She said he was terribly busy."

He shivered slightly. Considering the doctor's usual reaction to Kasumi, it was no wonder that the receptionist had refused. He could just imagine the resulting chaos.

Ranma hovered uncertainly at the gateway. He wanted to go to the hospital to check on the two idiots for himself. But something was holding him back. It took him a moment or two to realize what it was -- a overwhelming reluctance to stray too far from the dojo... and Akane. After his conversation with Nabiki, how could he possibly consider leaving Akane alone like that?

"Are you going to the hospital, Ranma?"

He closed his eyes briefly, then shook his head. "No. Not right now."

Ranma walked back into the house and glanced upstairs, struggling with an impulse to run up to Akane's room. He brushed his fingers on the steps. Freshly cleaned. While he was sitting in the tub dozing, Kasumi had been hard at work cleaning up his mess. He went back outside to see her swabbing the stones with remarkable efficiency.

As he watched, Kasumi wrung out her mop. The dirty, brown-tinted water oozed its way between her fingers and trickled back into the pail. A few stray drops stained the edge of Kasumi's skirt.

"You missed lunch. Would you like something to eat, Ranma?"

He fought down a surge of nausea and muttered, "No thanks. I'm... not hungry."

"But you're always hungry unless Akane's cooking," Kasumi said with mild astonishment.

He simply shook his head.

"Oh, that'll work out fine. I hope to finish cleaning up before I have to start dinner." Kasumi resumed her humming and mopping.

He found the sight of Kasumi placidly working on another patch of dried blood profoundly disturbing. It just didn't seem right.

"Kasumi, you... you shouldn't be doing that."

She didn't need to ask what he was talking about. The eldest Tendo daughter looked at him and said very gently, "It needs to be done. And who else will?"

"...." Ranma had no answer to give her.

Kasumi scrubbed at a particularly stubborn stain. "It's not supposed to rain for the next several days, so I thought it would best to clean up this mess right now. We can't just leave it here. What would the neighbors think?"

A few minutes of silence passed. Then he said in a very subdued voice, "Do you need... some help?"

Kasumi gave him a sunny smile. "Oh, thank you, Ranma." She looked around for a moment, then handed him an empty metal pail, a dust pan, and a brush. "There's broken glass all along the front of the house.

Could you pick it up for me?"

"Broken glass?" He looked behind him at the house. Every window that he could see had been shattered.

(How the hell did that happen? No, I don't think I wanna know.)

As he bent down and began to carefully scoop up the glass shards, he muttered, "Sorry about your room, Kasumi."

"Hmm?"

Ranma mutely pointed up at her bedroom. Her curtains trailed out of the broken windows and fluttered in the mild breeze. Kasumi blinked but seemed otherwise unfazed by the discovery.

"Oh, don't worry. I'll just put up some blankets. I'm sure Nabiki can get someone out here in a day or two."

Ranma and Kasumi settled down to a companionable silence as they began the work of cleaning up the entranceway to their home.

> Part 3c: UNFORGIVEN

Ukyo slowly made her way back to her restaurant. Every so often, she would look behind her only to see Shampoo still following her. The Amazon girl made no attempt to attack or speak to her, but she continued to watch Ukyo's every move.

(This HAS to be one of the worst days of my life. And with the way my life's been up to this point, that's saying quite a lot.)

Ukyo's thoughts drifted back to another truly wretched day -- the day that she had allowed pure desperation to drive her into doing the unforgivable.

[six months ago - right after the events at Mount Phoenix]

After Ranma and the others returned from Mount Phoenix, Ukyo sensed that something significant had happened between Ranma and Akane. There was a growing closeness that badly unnerved her... then she found out about the plans for Ranma and Akane's secret wedding.

She was frantic, angry, and desperate -- so desperate that she ended up breaking one of her own cardinal rules. Ukyo decided to use magic to 'persuade' Ranma to change his mind about Akane and the wedding.

It was really for his own good. Akane was totally wrong for him. Couldn't he see that? She only wanted to save him from the emotional pain that would inevitably come from such a hopeless marriage. It wasn't as if she was trying to use magic to force him into loving her. She only wanted to make him back off from the wedding...and

Akane.

The bright green vial in the old antique shop's window display caught her eye and planted the idea in her head. After the fiasco with Kuno's phoenix egg, she was leery of having anything to do with that crazy old shopkeeper again. However, she couldn't stop herself from asking him about the potion.

The shopkeeper -- with a little 'persuasion' from her battle spatula -- finally coughed up a complete set of instructions for the supposedly foolproof love potion. A drop of her own blood added to the potion would ensure that the person consuming the concoction would fall in love with no one else but herself. There would be none of that ridiculous "first person you see" junk.

She got the potion ready but had plenty of second thoughts about actually using it... then Ranma and Akane walked into her restaurant. Watching them laugh and joke with each other instead of arguing as usual, Ukyo made an impulsive but fateful decision. A quick flick of the wrist and it was done.

But even as she watched Ranma gobble down the dosed okonomiyaki, she realized that it had been an incredibly stupid thing to do.

The potion didn't take effect immediately. Ukyo watched Ranma dash out of her restaurant with Akane, leaving the chef alone with her steadily growing guilt, fears, and regrets. She had jeopardized everything. What if Ranma found out about what she'd done? The last thing she wanted was to be treated like just another conniving, unwanted fiancée -- to be treated just like Kodachi or Shampoo.

By the time she gathered up her courage to say something to Ranma, it was much too late. The love potion had worked flawlessly. And so had the half-dozen or more other potions, magical items, and/or spells that various other people had tried on Ranma.

Ukyo had forgotten that this was Nerima, where impossible coincidences took place on a regular basis. Or, as she had read somewhere, "When it rained, it poured." Nerima being Nerima, it seemed that everyone had come up with pretty much the same solution for breaking up a Saotome-Tendo wedding -- throw magic at it. And with his usual luck, Ranma -- not Akane -- ended up taking the brunt of everyone's schemes.

It might have been just another ridiculous fiasco, just another comedy of errors. But this time, the mess turned very serious and Dr. Tofu did not hesitate to let everyone know it.

She wasn't really sure who else had been involved. Kodachi and Shampoo for sure. Probably Cologne, Mousse, Mr. Saotome, Kuno, Tsubasa, Gosunkugi, and Ryoga. Possibly some of the other boys and girls at school. And then there was Ukyo Kuonji, just as guilty as the rest of them.

Ranma was whisked off into Dr. Tofu's care. No one really knew what happened afterward. Ranma reappeared a few days later. He seemed a little pale, a little disoriented, but otherwise in good health.

At first, Ukyo's only thought was that of overwhelming relief. Ranma was fine. Any plans for a Saotome-Tendo wedding were put off

indefinitely. Everything gradually settled back to normal in Nerima. Her guilty secret was intact and no one appeared to have any idea of her involvement. There seemed to be no good reason to say anything to anybody -- especially Ranma -- about the affair.

[the present]

She had thought that there had been no real harm done. She couldn't have been more wrong.

Yes, everything was back to normal. She was still 'good, old trustworthy Uc-chan'. And it was all based on a lie. A simple lie of omission.

But in the last two weeks or so, Ukyo had begun to wonder if Ranma DID know something. On rare occasions, she'd catch a fleeting glimpse of a wary, yet sad, sort of look on his face. And she would occasionally sense the faintest trace of hesitation before he ate her cooking. True, Ranma never said anything to her about the magic potion fiasco. It could just be her guilty conscience catching up with her. But she couldn't help but wonder....

The nagging uncertainty made her jumpy, anxious, and bad-tempered. Everyone noticed. Even Akane had asked her whether anything was wrong.

(Maybe I should just take my lumps and tell Ranma the truth.)

Ukyo ignored Shampoo as she unlocked the front door of her restaurant. She obtained what little satisfaction she could from slamming the door shut. If Shampoo tried to follow her in here, she'd teach that Amazon bimbo a good lesson or two.

She took a few steps and nearly slipped on a largish envelope lying on the floor. In a thoroughly pissed off mood, she was ready to chuck the stupid thing into the trash. But as she picked up the package, she noticed a semi-familiar address. The envelope was from her great aunt. She hadn't seen the old woman for many years but Ukyo had fond memories of her. She didn't have many pleasant memories, especially after being abandoned by Genma, so she treasured whatever good memories she did have.

The chef smiled to herself as she recalled her great aunt's gentle, soothing vagueness. It reminded Ukyo of Kasumi. The chef suddenly frowned as she realized her thoughts had again turned back to the Tendos.

(What's wrong with me? Can't I go ten minutes without thinking about Ranma or that blasted family?)

She shivered slightly. Is this how Kodachi became so crazy? Having her thoughts gradually become more and more fixated on Ranma? To be incapable of thinking of anything else?

Ukyo quickly shook herself out the mood. No, she was nothing like Kodachi. She wasn't obsessed, only very determined and admittedly somewhat stubborn.

As she walked through her restaurant, she briefly considered leaving Nerima forever. But even as she toyed with the idea, she knew it would never happen. Not as long as there was the slightest possibility, the faintest hope, that Ranma would FINALLY come to his senses and see that Akane was not the right girl for him.

She knew that Ryoga had tried to leave Nerima, the Tendos, and Ranma Saotome behind more than once. However, he always came back sooner or later.

Ukyo laughed bitterly. Besides, where would she go? Back home to Father? Back to a man who won't even look at her?

She tucked the envelope under her arm and headed upstairs. She'd deal with it later. She had more important things to think about.

Ukyo wandered into her bedroom. Her battle spatula rested on her futon, along with a scattering of dresses and two pairs of torn pantyhose. Tossing the envelope aside, she quickly changed out of her fancy clothes and switched back to her usual masculine pants and shirt. She then flung herself down on the futon and stared up at the ceiling.

No, leaving Nerima would never be a feasible option for her. She had put too much of herself into her pursuit of Ranma, first as an enemy and then as a fiancée. To leave now was to admit that all her effort and sacrifice had been completely pointless.

Would she give up now, just based on the words of a brainless Amazon bimbo and a hopelessly dense girl like Akane Tendo?

She shuddered as she remembered the look in Ranma's eyes as he crouched on the ground, snarling. Inhuman. That's what it was. Utterly inhuman.

No matter what Akane or Shampoo said, she refused to believe that... that creature running around on all fours and fawning all over Akane was just a fragment of Ranma's own mind. It was simply too alien, too different from the Ranma Ukyo knew.

She wasn't sure WHAT it was. However, she was certain that Genma Saotome was definitely responsible for its existence.

Her eyes narrowed. Hold it. What did anybody really KNOW about the Neko-ken? Genma was the only one who really had any idea how the whole mess got started. And Ukyo knew first-hand just what a worthless, lying bastard Genma Saotome was. Poor Ranma had been only a child at the time. Did he actually remember anything or was he merely repeating what Genma had told him over and over again?

Ukyo rolled over onto her stomach and started drumming her fingers angrily on the floor.

(What if it wasn't simply an incredibly stupid training exercise with cats? What if it was something much more...sinister? Genma might be a fool, a liar, and a coward but would he have been really THAT

desperate...?)

Before this afternoon, Ukyo would have sworn that the man actually cared about his son. But Genma's attempts to justify the terrible things he had done to Ranma now convinced her that Ranma's father was both stupid enough and ruthless enough to do ANYTHING if he thought it would make Ranma a better martial artist.

Meddle with the occult? Possession? Why not? Ukyo could just picture the scenario... an ambitious father, a botched summoning of some netherworld entity, a helpless boy....

She growled softly to herself. (Genma... if I find any proof of this, you're a dead man!)

No, there was no way she was going to back off and go away. Not after what she'd seen this morning. She couldn't understand it. How could Akane and the Tendos just stand by? How could they do nothing to cure Ranma when it was so blatantly clear that there was something terribly wrong with him?

Ukyo felt a surge of renewed determination. She was NOT going to desert Ranma. Perhaps he was possessed. Perhaps he was just crazy. With a father like Genma, who wouldn't be? It didn't really matter. He needed her help, whether he knew it or not, and she was not about to let anyone stop her. Not the Tendos. Not that stupid Amazon. Not anyone.

(If Akane can't -- or won't -- take care of Ranma, then she bloody well doesn't deserve him!)

> Part 3d: SKELETONS FROM A CHINESE CLOSET

Once Ukyo disappeared inside her restaurant, Shampoo turned and slowly trudged back to the Neko-hanten. She was not looking forward to her upcoming talk with Cologne. How was she going to explain her sudden decision to give up on Ranma after eighteen months of trying nearly everything under the sun, moon, and stars to catch him? Cologne would demand answers as was her right as an Amazon Elder. And Shampoo had no answers to give.

The only thing Shampoo knew for certain was that Ranma had chosen Akane. And she had an awful premonition that trying to separate the two now would only bring disaster. Not only on herself, but on the Amazon tribe as well. How she knew, she couldn't say. It was just gut instinct.

She could just imagine her great grandmother's reaction to her decision. Cologne had made it quite clear that giving up and going home was NOT an option. And as for her failure to uphold her personal honor? Shampoo would be lucky if she ended up being banished from the village for a VERY long time. She could be formally outcast. At worst, she could die for her failure.

Shampoo hoped it wouldn't go that far.

There was no way to hide what had happened at the Tendo house that morning. That idiot Mousse was sure to have told Cologne everything.

Shampoo bit her lip. But what about hiding her decision to give up on Ranma? Maybe she could simply... forget... to say anything about it and let Cologne assume that her intentions were unchanged.

The Amazon girl shook her head slowly. The idea was tempting but it was only delaying the inevitable. It might not be today, but she would eventually need to make her stand and tell Cologne she was giving up. If she thought wasting a year and a half was bad, what would Cologne think about wasting two years, three years, or more?

Shampoo's steps slowed even more as she approached the Neko-hanten. No, that was the coward's way out. She may have done many dishonest and even dishonorable things since arriving in Nerima, but she refused to become a coward. She would tell Cologne that she, Shampoo, was no longer interested in marrying Ranma. She would just have to deal with the consequences, whatever they might be.

Shampoo hesitated outside the door, took a moment to gather her courage, then walked inside.

The first thing she noticed was that the normally bustling restaurant was deserted.

The second thing she noticed was her great grandmother's cold, stern expression. Cologne was very, very displeased. Shampoo felt chills run down her spine.

"Shampoo, we have a... 'visitor'."

The young Amazon blinked in surprise. Of all things, she didn't expect to be greeted by that statement -- or warning, rather. She glanced to her left and stiffened angrily.

"Dan Xin," Shampoo snarled, her voice bristling with hostility.

Dan Xin laughed nastily. "Hello, Shampoo. And how is the husband hunt going?"

Dan Xin was a petite, black-haired Amazon woman with a well-developed figure. She looked remarkably cute except for the gleam in her eyes. It was a lean and hungry look -- a look that made Nabiki Tendo seem like the very soul of generosity.

Shampoo's lips curled in contempt as she noticed Dan Xin's attire. Instead of traditional Amazon or Chinese clothes, Dan Xin was dressed in a snugly fitting scarlet leather outfit which bore her personal motif -- the heron. On her back she carried a familiar crane-hilted sword. The blade had once belonged to Mousse's mother.

"What are you doing here?" Shampoo demanded.

"Oh, since I was in the area, I just decided to drop in on my sister Amazons...."

Cologne interrupted in an icy voice. "YOU ARE NO SISTER OF OURS. You were cast out of the Amazon tribe for your outrageously dishonorable conduct -- for inciting treason, not to mention your involvement in theft, torture, and murder."

"Mere rumors. You never found any actual proof of my guilt, did you? Besides, you and the Council of Elders couldn't afford to have me executed. Isn't that right, great grandmother?" Dan Xin smirked at Cologne.

The Elder stared stonily at the ex-Amazon but said nothing.

Dan Xin continued in an airy voice. "Well, being outcast has been no great loss to me. There's so much more to do in the outside world. So many more opportunities...."

Cologne narrowed her eyes ominously. "So I hear. You've chosen to prostitute yourself by selling your sword to the highest bidder." She sniffed contemptuously. "And I've also heard that your person is available. For the right price."

Dan Xin flushed and snarled, "Well, it's better than sitting around in that miserable village raising rice and chickens!" She glanced around the Neko-hanten in contempt. "Or running some cheap noodle shop."

The ex-Amazon gave Shampoo a sly look, then murmured in mock sympathy, "I've heard that you've been having problems with your new successor, great grandmother. But what can you expect when you have to settle for second-best." She burst into malicious laughter.

Shampoo simmered at Dan Xin's jibe and the reminder that she had not been Cologne's first choice as successor. And Dan Xin's laughter reminded her all too much of Kodachi's insane cackling.

"Poor Shampoo. How does it feel to be a miserable failure all the way around, cousin dear? You failed to kill the outsider woman who defeated you so easily in front of the entire village. And then you managed to get beaten again, this time by a mere boy. Nearly two years later and you STILL haven't managed to marry him! That's truly pathetic. Please tell me that you've managed to seduce him, at least. Or have you managed to screw up that as well?"

Before Shampoo could explode in fury, Cologne gave her a hard, warning stare. The young Amazon clenched her teeth and struggled to stay calm. Finally, she forced herself to shrug nonchalantly and say, "It's none of your business."

Cologne's expression did not change but inside, she uttered a small sigh of exasperation. (You're going to have to do much better than that, Shampoo, if you want to convince Dan Xin of anything.)

The Elder turned to the ex-Amazon and said, "Enough of your insults. Go. You have no business with us."

Dan Xin uttered a nasty little snicker but turned to leave. For an instant, Shampoo stood blocking the way to the front door. The two young Amazons glared at each other for a few seconds. Shampoo then stepped aside, leaving barely enough room for her cousin to pass.

Perched on her stick, Cologne hopped over to the window and watched Dan Xin disappear down the street. She muttered to herself, "She's going to be trouble for sure. What is that traitorous little bitch doing here in Nerima?"

"Great grandmother, do you think she wants Ranma?" Shampoo said in profoundly worried tones.

"I can't be sure, but I don't think so. Dan Xin only likes two things, wealth and power. Men actually rank quite low on her list of priorities. She's probably just trying to provoke you."

Shampoo desperately hoped that was true. Dan Xin was a superb martial artist and her skill was matched only by her viciousness and greed. Matters were complicated enough without Dan Xin's interference.

When she noticed that Cologne getting ready to leave, she hastily said, "Uh, great grandmother... I have something to tell you. About Ranma."

Cologne muttered distractedly, "Girl, you look exhausted. Let me guess. Things did not go well this morning."

"You... could say that."

"Well, I don't have time to deal with it right now. Tell me when I get back. I need to find out what that wretched girl's up to."

"But great grandmother, this is very important! Ranma...!"

Cologne snapped, "Shampoo, I have more important things to worry about than your latest screwup with son-in-law! I've been sensing strange powers at work since last night. Now Dan Xin shows up. It can't be a coincidence. Wherever that little monster goes, murder and mayhem follow. I need to learn more."

"But...."

"I doubt that your cousin's interested in Ranma, but if she is, it would be best if I find out as soon as possible. I'll deal with Dan Xin. You're to stay out of this and take care of the restaurant." The Amazon Elder hopped out of the Neko-hanten, leaving a worried and frustrated Shampoo far behind.

"Ooooh!" After struggling to get up enough courage to tell Cologne about Ranma, it was infuriating to find out that the old woman was too busy to listen to her.

As Cologne made her way across the rooftops of Nerima, she reflected on old history and past mistakes....

Dan Xin had been her chosen successor and protegee... her favorite great granddaughter... the child of Cologne's most beloved granddaughter. It had been her own love and affection -- not to mention pride in Dan Xin's abilities -- that blinded her to Dan Xin's

true nature. Cologne grimly admitted her own fault. She must bear much of the blame for what happened nearly eight years ago. The girl was cunning and deceptive, but there had been definite signs of her personality flaws. Cologne had simply chosen to ignore their seriousness. After all, an Amazon must be ruthless and merciless against her opponents.

Unfortunately, to Dan Xin, everyone was her opponent... and her prey.

By the end of that terrible winter, over fifteen members of the tribe had died, including Dan Xin's own mother. Although she had not personally dealt the killing blows in most cases, Dan Xin had been either directly or indirectly responsible for each death. Everyone in the village knew it.

Unfortunately, there had been plenty of circumstantial evidence but no real proof. And so it had come down to a trial-by-combat -- Dan Xin against the Council's chosen champion.

But Cologne had done her work too well. After a ferocious duel, Mousse's mother had died a particularly brutal death at Dan Xin's hands. Since Dan Xin was technically 'innocent' by virtue of her undisputed victory, the most the Council of Elders could do was to declare Dan Xin banished and forever outcast from the tribe.

Ever since her banishment, Dan Xin had wisely stayed out of the Amazons' way. That made her reappearance in Nerima all the more puzzling. She must have a compelling reason to dare cross paths with an Elder... especially Cologne. But what was the creature up to? The situation was fraught with possibilities, both good and bad.

Even though Dan Xin was now considered an outsider, even outsiders received a limited degree of immunity if they won a trial-by-combat. Cologne and the other Amazons wronged by Dan Xin could not take vengeance against her for her past crimes.

But for crimes newly committed... that was an entirely different matter.

And so, high above the streets of Nerima, Cologne continued to cautiously trail her quarry, watching and waiting.

In a way, Cologne hoped that Dan Xin would try to ensnare Ranma in whatever schemes she might have. Willful interference with an officially sanctioned betrothal -- such as the one between Shampoo and Ranma -- qualified as a crime in Amazon law. Normally such a crime would not merit death. But in this case, Cologne was confident that the Council of Elders would gladly stretch a few legal points if it meant disposing of Dan Xin permanently.

And if Dan Xin tried to injure Ranma? Even better for Cologne. Ranma was practically a member of the tribe already -- even if the ungrateful whelp didn't accept that fact.

Cologne peeked around a chimney stack. Dan Xin was talking into a cellular phone but the angle was wrong for reading her lips. As the Amazon Elder prepared to move to a more advantageous position, she sensed a presence watching her. She carefully scanned her surroundings but could not locate the observer.

(What a fool I am! There's no reason that Dan Xin would be alone here in Nerima. I must be more careful.)

Shampoo spent the next hour or so going over every detail of the morning's events. When Cologne returned, she needed to be ready with believable answers. And she had none. All Shampoo had a sickening premonition that if someone tried to interfere with Ranma or tried to separate him from Akane, something terrible would happen. It had been that certainty -- that feeling -- that prompted Shampoo to keep Ukyo from seeing Ranma. There was no telling what that stupid spatula girl would have done.

Shampoo was still struggling to sort things out when she heard the back door open. She ran through the kitchen and said, "Great grandmother...! Oh, it's you." Her voice trailed off in disgust and disappointment.

"Shampoo! You're safe!" Mousse ran toward her. Shampoo briskly fended him off with a wok.

"Mousse, I'm NOT in the mood for this! You're just as bad as that crazy Kodachi...."

Barely deterred, Mousse scrambled back to his feet. "What's happened at the Tendos!? Why was Ranma running around on all fours? Why did he go...."

But Shampoo didn't immediately answer. Instead she slowly put down the wok and sank down onto a nearby stool. She thought about the insane look of possessiveness on Kodachi's face. Then she thought about Ranma's icy cold stare as he crouched next to Akane....

(Of course. It was all in the eyes.)

It had been very briefest of looks. Ranma's mother and the other women had only seen hostility and rage in his eyes. But Shampoo had seen something else.

Pure, raw hunger.

The hunger had such an intensity that it seemed to have a life of its own. It was as if a veneer has been stripped away, exposing a dark core unseen and unsuspected by anyone.

Why was she the only one to notice?

Ranma was a generous person. Shampoo knew that. After all, he had put up with her persistent advances for so long. To see this hunger, this possessiveness, residing in the depths of his soul.... She shivered. How long had it been there, hidden and veiled from everyone? How long had it been buried so deep that no one -- not even Ranma -- was aware of its existence?

She suddenly remembered a videotape someone had shown her. It had been recorded well over a year ago during something called the Martial Arts Ice Skating Championship. Mikado Sanzenin had just threatened to steal a kiss from Akane's lips. What had Ranma

shouted...?

'Akane is MY fiancée! Touch her and I'll KILL you!!!'

Were his feelings so strong even back then?

With all the disturbing thoughts churning around in her brain, the only thing Shampoo could say was, "Oh my...."

In the meantime, Mousse continued to babble an endless stream of questions. He finally noticed Shampoo's pale, stunned expression.

"Did Ranma hurt you? If he did, I'll...."

Shampoo slowly looked at him and grabbed Mousse's robes. In a low, even voice, she said, "Don't even try. Do you hear me? You attack Ranma now and YOU... WILL... DIE."

Mousse gazed at her in a pathetic, hopeful sort of way. "Does... does this mean that you're worried about me, Shampoo?"

Shampoo stared blankly at him, then abruptly released her grip and gave him a half-hearted shove.

"I'm worried about Ranma."

Mousse wilted in disappointment. But as she walked out of the kitchen in a daze, his acute hearing picked up Shampoo's last words.

"I'm worried about all of us."

> Part 3e: THE HEART AND SOUL OF THE MATTER

Akane woke up to a soft knock on her door. She rubbed her eyes, then abruptly sat up in bed.

(I don't believe it! I fell asleep! What's going on? Where's Ranma!?)

The knock came again.

"Come IN!" Akane said irritably.

Nabiki entered the bedroom and said, "I need to talk to you about this morning. And about Ranma."

"Nabiki, I don't have time for this." She grabbed at the clock on her bedside table. In the process, she almost knocked over the empty glass which had contained the warm milk Kasumi had given her earlier that afternoon.

"I've been asleep for hours! I've got to check on Ranma! There's no telling what that idiot might do...."

"He's fine."

"Huh?" Akane's head swivelled toward her sister.

"He's helping Kasumi clean up the walkway."

"Huh?" Akane blankly repeated.

Nabiki closed the door behind her and patiently waited for Akane to absorb this information. In the meantime, she went through her mental checklist of things done and things left to do.

She had taken Ranma's bloody clothes, stashed Kuno's katana in a safe place, told her subordinates to hold the fort business-wise, and browbeat Sasuke into telling her what little he could about Kuno.

Next on the agenda was the search of Ranma's room. Nabiki wanted to get her hands on that old Neko-ken manual of Genma's. If it wasn't in Ranma's room, it could be in her father's bedroom.

She hoped that the night would be quiet. Her ribs ached, her body was covered in bruises, and she was running herself ragged. But there was no help for it. No one else in the family was capable of handling matters properly.

"Ranma's fine? Are you trying to tell me that there's nothing wrong with him?"

"I didn't say that. I just meant that there's no immediate need to panic, Akane. So you can surely spare a few minutes to talk to me."

"I'm not panicking!" Akane looked suspiciously at her sister. "Why do you want to know, anyway?"

Nabiki looked suitably fed up and exasperated with the whole situation. "Listen, Akane. You know how Ranma's mother and Ukyo reacted. They're both so messed up about the Neko-ken and Ranma's cat thing, they can't see beyond their own noses. Figuring out Shampoo's Japanese gives me a headache. You know that Ranma won't remember anything. Who else am I going to talk to? Kodachi?"

Akane winced at the thought and sank back restlessly onto her bed. "All right," she muttered.

"So, tell me what happened this morning."

"Well, I came back from my morning run...."

Nabiki listened intently to Akane's story but didn't ask any questions. At the end of Akane's version, Nabiki's only comment was, "I see."

Akane glared at her sister. "Is that it? 'I see.'? I thought you wanted to HELP Ranma!"

Nabiki's eyebrows twitched and she said in an unexpectedly terse voice, "I do. And I did."

Akane backed off a bit in the face of Nabiki's temper. "Uh... So what did I miss?"

"Shampoo did what!?" Akane stared at her sister in disbelief.

"I said that she was kept Ukyo from following you and Ranma to the bathroom."

"I don't believe it! Why?"

"Don't look at me. I don't know. All I can say is that it certainly appears like she's given up on Ranma."

"But... but it's so sudden. I mean, she's been chasing after him non-stop all this time and she gives up just like that?" Akane snapped her fingers, then her eyes narrowed in suspicion. "That Amazon bimbo... she's probably got some crazy scheme going with Cologne."

Nabiki sounded pensive. "No, I don't think so. Don't let your jealousy blind you to the facts. Shampoo has flat out admitted before witnesses that she knows that Ranma wants YOU. Not only is she willing to accept you as Ranma's chosen fiancée, but now she's also ready to defend YOUR position, by force, if necessary."

Akane snapped, "I'm NOT jealous!"

Nabiki stared at her younger sister and shook her head. "That's pure reflex and habit talking, Akane. Not good."

Akane's face turned beet red. She already knew that, but to be reminded by Nabiki, of all people....

Her older sister sighed wearily. "Akane, I know that you and Ranma have been gradually working things out between you."

"Well, um.... Yes."

"Unfortunately, I think you may be running out of time."

Akane looked up at Nabiki. "What is it? If you've got something to say, spit it out!"

Her sister gave her a long searching stare. "All right, I do have something to tell you. Can you handle it?"

Akane's instinctive reaction was to snap out a furious, "Of course!" However, Nabiki's grim expression and her warnings about bad habits made her hesitate... and really think. After a moment, she nodded very slowly and said, "If it has to do with Ranma... yes... I think I can."

"All right. Trouble's coming, Akane. You don't think that this morning was the end of it, do you? And to be honest with you, I'm really worried."

Akane looked nervous. "What are you talking about?"

"Listen, I don't have any real proof about what's going on. I may be way off-base about this. But I have a few nasty suspicions. First, that what happened this morning was a carefully orchestrated plot directed at Ranma. Second, that the person responsible for this morning's battle wasn't simply trying to defeat or even kill Ranma. I think this enemy's out to really destroy him -- heart, mind, and soul. I'm not talking some minor psyche-out tactic, here. I'm talking total destruction or worse. Madness. Obliteration. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Akane went pale and nodded slowly.

"Let's face it, Akane. This guy's done his or her homework. He's going for the soft underbelly."

Akane winced at the all too graphic image.

"Ranma may be... hell, IS... one of the best martial artists around but he is NOT well equipped to handle this sort of attack."

Akane suppressed the urge to scream 'Shut up!' at her sister. She almost hated Nabiki for clearly stating things that she herself had only vaguely dreaded. But yelling at her sister wouldn't make the problem go away.

"He's insecure, socially inept, emotionally immature, and regardless of what you might think most of the time, he's actually a pretty sensitive and caring person."

"I... I know." Akane stared down at her nervously twisting fingers.

"I'm glad to hear that. Because Ranma's going to need every bit of your support he can get. If you really want to help Ranma, he needs to know that he can trust you AND talk to you. He also needs to know that YOU trust him."

"M-m-me?"

Nabiki pulled at her hair in exasperation. "Akane, quit being so dense! Who else can Ranma talk to!?"

She knew that her older sister was right. Genma was hopeless and his mother was probably even worse. When Akane thought about it, Ranma had an overabundance of enemies and rivals, a lot of casual acquaintances, and a few friends. But there were no truly close friends. Well, there was Ukyo. But Akane had noticed an odd sort of uneasiness between Ranma and Ukyo recently, even before this morning's events.

"Akane, I'm not asking you to lie. That would be worse than blurting out something stupid. I am asking you to think and think CAREFULLY about what you say and what you do."

Nabiki's voice softened just a bit. "I'm serious about the consequences. If you really mess up, you may not get the chance to tell Ranma 'Oops, I didn't really mean that.'"

As she watched her sister, Nabiki knew the incredibly heavy burden she was placing on Akane's shoulders. Self-control had never been Akane's strong point but Nabiki also knew that this was something that she couldn't possibly handle by herself. She HAD to have Akane's help. Nabiki hoped that her baby sister was up to the task.

"But... what about you, Nabiki?" Akane's voice was soft, uncertain.

She smiled sardonically. "Can you imagine Ranma unburdening his darkest insecurities to me?"

"Oh."

Akane went over Nabiki's words in her mind and frowned. Something bothered her.... Her gaze flashed upward to meet her sister's. In an accusing voice, she said, "Nabiki, how do you know all this?"

"I don't know anything for sure. All I've got are a few deductions and a lot of guesswork."

"If I ever find out that you were involved or that you knew that something was going to happen but didn't warn us, you're going to be SO sorry...."

Nabiki glared at her sister before responding.

"I had no idea anything like this was going to occur." Nabiki's unspoken thought was, (No, I didn't know but I can venture a good guess where this guy got some of his information on Ranma.)

Nabiki suddenly switched to the offensive and let a real hint of anger seep into her voice. "What kind of monster do you think I am? Sure, I like money and I can be a real bitch at times. But I certainly do not go in for mass murder!"

With those words, Nabiki did an excellent job of storming out of the room.

Shaken by her sister's outburst and the real anger behind it, Akane failed to notice Nabiki discretely grabbing the empty milk glass as she left.

In the hallway, Nabiki choked down a surge of annoyance. It wasn't that she minded being in control -- of playing 'general' and moving people around like chess pieces. But she did have her own ethical standards.

And it wasn't as if she really had much of a choice. Father was incapable of any sort of leadership. Akane simply didn't have the temperament for strategic planning.

Kasumi was a different matter. Nabiki had long since figured out that it wasn't a lack of ability on Kasumi's part. Her older sister just didn't want to deal with the 'dirty' stuff.

Nabiki stared down thoughtfully at the few remaining drops of milk in the glass. Yes, Kasumi usually left the messy problems to Nabiki, but this time, it seemed that Kasumi was not above actively meddling. She

briefly considered talking to her older sister but changed her mind.

(No, I don't think I'm up to any more gut-wrenching conversations with the family.)

Back at the Kuno mansion, the loyal family retainer Sasuke was caught in a real dilemma. After an excruciatingly thorough interrogation by Nabiki Tendo, she had flatly warned him to keep Kodachi out of Ranma's way, at least for a day or so.

Normally, he would have dismissed the warning but he couldn't forget the destruction and blood in the Tendos' front yard. And after a call to the hospital, he HAD to take her warning very seriously.

He glanced uneasily at the bed. Mistress Kodachi would not going to remain unconscious for much longer. Not without some help. And he needed to check on Master Kuno.

(Oh, what should I do? She'll wake up soon! But if Miss Tendo is right, it'll be a disaster if she going chasing after Ranma Saotome tonight. I'm sworn to serve and obey the Kuno family but I also have a duty to protect them! Oh, what should I do?)

Finally, the little ninja gathered up his courage and raided Kodachi's laboratory. He lit the stick of black rose incense, placed it in her bedroom, and stole out of the house.

After Nabiki stormed out the door, Akane curled up on her bed to think a bit more. Finally, she headed downstairs.

She peeked out the front door. Except for the occasional claw marks here and there, there was barely any evidence of the vicious fight that had occurred only a few hours ago. Kasumi was giving the porch a final wash while Ranma was busily picking up the last few bits of debris.

She didn't make a sound but Ranma was instantly aware of Akane's presence. He turned and gave her a faint smile. She wondered what had occurred during her nap. When she had left him, Ranma had been terribly, though quietly, upset. He now seemed to be a lot calmer... more focused.

Kasumi picked up her bucket and mop, then headed inside the house. "Dinner will be ready soon."

Ranma said, "Thanks, Kasumi."

After her sister left, Akane shuffled her feet and said, "You seem to be feeling much better."

Ranma gave her a wry grin. "Yeah. I guess so."

She gave him a curious look.

He shrugged. "Nabiki and I had a long talk."

Recalling her own conversation with Nabiki, she winced. "So what did she say?"

"She gave me a good kick in the butt, so to speak. Told me what happened. Told me to stop wallowing in misery and take a good look at the big picture."

"Ohhh!" Akane was outraged by what she considered as Nabiki's callous and insensitive behavior. She turned to stomp right back upstairs and yell at her sister.

Ranma gently grabbed her wrist to stop her. He said quietly, "Akane, she did the right thing. I really needed it. There's a lot of stuff going on here and I was just too upset to see it."

She stared at him for a moment, then sank down on the freshly washed porch, scowling.

Standing next to Akane, Ranma closed his eyes to savor the smells and sounds of the spring afternoon. Everything seemed sharper, clearer than he could ever quite remember. He absently noticed the scent of Akane's sweat, which mingled in an oddly pleasant way with the smell from her shampoo and the surrounding greenery. The faint metallic tinge of blood should have spoiled everything but oddly, it did nothing to ruin his enjoyment.

However, at the same time, Ranma felt strangely out of sync with himself. It was an unfamiliar sensation. He was so used to mind and body being in unison -- that was essential for a martial artist. This time, his body was both strangely relaxed but also ready... ready for who knows what.

On the other hand, his brain definitely needed a vacation. Mentally, he wanted nothing more than to crawl in a dark hole to recover -- to get away from it all. Nabiki's little talk had taken a load off his mind but he still had way too much to worry about.

Meanwhile, Akane was brooding about how her sisters both managed to handle Ranma so well. After sighing loudly, she muttered, "Ranma, I'm sorry."

He blinked in surprise. "For what?"

"For not doing enough. I left you alone when I shouldn't have. I could've explained things better. I went off and fell asleep when you were.... I'm just no good at this!"

She glared at her knees. "Nabiki always knows the right things to say and Kasumi's always so nice!"

Akane grimaced. She had mumbled those last words out loud. And this was Ranma she was talking to. Nabiki could be right about his sensitivity but Akane was much more familiar with 'Ranma the jerk'. She waited for an insult, a teasing remark, or a verbal jab.

It never came.

There was a moment of silence as Ranma leaned back against the porch

post, then he said, "Yeah, right. Nabiki sure knows exactly what to say... to get a guy exactly where she wants him. And Kasumi's really nice and all that but a lot of times she just... ignores... the bad things that happen."

Akane looked hurt and a bit offended.

He shifted uncomfortably. "What's wrong?"

"How can you say that about my sisters?"

"Hey, I'm not being mean or nothing! But I've got eyes. It's no big secret what your sisters are like." He sounded a bit defensive.

Ranma took a deep breath to calm himself, then squatted down in front of her.

"Akane, you managed to save Ryoga's and Kuno's lives. You also stopped me from hurting Nabiki, Mousse, Kodachi, and a lot of other people, too. Don't try to tell me that's not enough. You were there when everyone needed you. That's plenty, okay? Your sisters aren't perfect -- not even Kasumi. Nobody's asking you to be, either."

Akane blinked, then slowly blushed. She smiled shyly at him and murmured, "Thanks, Ranma."

They sat on the porch, not quite touching but close together, and watched the sun sink in the sky.

Some time later, Kasumi called out, "Ranma? Akane? Dinner's ready."

Ranma sighed and rested his head against his knees. Akane gave him a curious look.

"What is it?"

"I was just thinking. I should probably go talk to Mother tomorrow." He sounded slightly sick at the prospect.

She snapped, "She should be coming to you -- especially after the horrible things she said!"

Ranma blinked in surprise. Akane normally didn't hold grudges against other people -- just against him. However, this time, she wasn't just mad at his mother. She was definitely STAYING mad.

> Part 3f: A CHANGE IN THE AIR

Dinner at the Tendo home started out peacefully enough. Everything

seemed pretty normal except for Ranma's relative lack of appetite. Akane worriedly noticed that he was eating like a normal person instead of wolfing down everything in sight. As for Ranma, he picked at his food and tried his best to ignore the nervous looks Soun kept giving him. They were halfway through the meal when they heard a familiar lecherous cackle echo throughout the house.

"WHATTA HAUL!!! Whatta haul! Whatta haul!"

Soun buried his face in his hands and moaned. To her alarm, Akane saw Ranma visibly twitch in annoyance.

Happosai hopped into the living room with his usual bag of underwear. As he bounced wildly around the room like a demented rubber ball, the old martial arts master left lingerie scattered all over the room and its occupants. Ranma, who had remained totally still, ended up with a black lace nightrobe dumped over his head. It was followed by the usual dousing of cold water.

Akane couldn't see Ranma-chan's face but she could see her knuckles whiten as she clutched her bowl and chopsticks. A barely perceptible quiver went through Ranma-chan's body.

Nabiki held up a cream silk teddy and examined the European designer label with an experienced eye. "The old pervert's really hit the jackpot this time. This little number could buy us all a hefty steak dinner."

The chopsticks and Ranma-chan's temper snapped simultaneously.

(Uh oh,) was the thought that crossed more than one mind.

Ranma-chan yanked the slopping wet nightrobe off her head. She lunged to her feet and howled, "HAPPOSAI!!!"

Nabiki's eyes went wide. Kasumi dropped her soup bowl. Akane uttered a soft, "Eep!"

With his head buried in his bag, Happosai did not immediately notice what had so shocked the Tendo daughters.

"Ranma, sweetums! Do I have a number for you! Let's see, let's see...." Happosai rummaged a moment and pulled out a nearly transparent, electric blue bra. He turned and said, "Won't you try this one for me.... WHOA MAMMA!"

"WHAT ARE YOU STARING AT, YOU OLD PERVERT!?!"

"Ranma! You... your...." Akane scrambled to her feet and grabbed Ranma-chan's arm.

She flicked a quick glance down at Akane and muttered distractedly, "What now? Can't it wait until I pound the crap out of that obnoxious old...."

Ranma-chan blinked.

(Hold it. I'm looking DOWN at Akane!? That's not right! I should be looking UP at her!)

Stupefied to realize that she still stood at least a good four or five inches taller than Akane, Ranma-chan hurriedly ripped her shirt open and checked her chest.

(Yup, breasts still there.)

Soun keeled over while Happosai drooled at the magnificent sight.

Akane and her sisters stared speechlessly at Ranma-chan. Instead of the buxom, petite, red-haired girl they were all familiar with, Ranma-chan now had the exact same height and black hair as her boy-form. And she no longer looked like a cute girl of fourteen or so. Ranma's female form was now a stunningly beautiful young woman of nearly eighteen years.

A reasonably observant person might have noticed that red-haired Ranma-chan and black-haired Ranma had a strong family resemblance. Now the relationship between Ranma's girl-type and boy-type was practically impossible to miss. Except for her distinctly female features and figure, Ranma-chan was essentially a perfect match to her male form. Even her eyes were the exact same shade of blue-gray.

Happosai finally broke out of his trance. His expression somehow managed to become even more lecherous as he homed in on Ranma-chan's exposed bosom.

Her looks might have changed, but there was nothing wrong with Ranma-chan's reflexes. She smashed the incoming Happosai's head into the floor, then punted him out of the living room.

"Take a hike, you old freak!"

After they all watched the old lech sail off into the evening sky, Ranma-chan turned to see Akane mutely holding up the steel tea kettle. She stared at her altered reflection for a long time before finally taking the kettle. One deep breath and she dumped the hot liquid over her head.

Ranma felt the familiar sense of transformation. He quickly checked his height and pigtail, then heaved a great sigh of relief and sat down abruptly on the floor. Nabiki got up and walked out of the room without saying a word.

Akane knelt down beside him. "Ranma, are you all right?"

"No. Shit, what now!?" The last words came out more like a moan.

Kasumi cheerfully said, "But Ranma, at least you didn't turn into a short, red-haired boy!"

"That's supposed to make me feel better?"

Akane handed Ranma a napkin. After wiping his face dry, he looked up to see the Tendos staring at him with worried expressions on their faces.

"I think you need to see Dr. Tofu as soon as possible, son," Soun said in a surprisingly firm voice.

"Yeah. That sounds like a real good idea."

Nabiki's voice suddenly cut into the conversation. "Sorry, but Dr. Tofu's too busy to see anyone tonight. He's still at the hospital."

"Why?" Akane looked up in surprise.

Her older sister said, "Apparently he's having trouble stabilizing two of his patients."

Ranma's head jerked up and he stared almost angrily at Nabiki.

"What the hell do you mean by that? What's wrong with them? Just what did I DO to them?"

Surprisingly, Nabiki glanced at her older sister. Kasumi blushed slightly and murmured, "Well, they... they did have some nasty cuts and bruises."

Nabiki pointedly prompted her sister. "And...."

Kasumi gave her father a demure, almost guilty look. "And it seemed that something had... badly disrupted the chi in their bodies."

The long silence that followed was finally broken by the sound of ripping fabric. Ranma flung the torn napkin aside and bolted out of the living room. Akane and the others caught up to him as he was speaking into the phone.

"Mousse? Where's Cologne?"

Ranma suddenly jerked the receiver away from his ear. Everyone on the Tendo house could hear loud yelling, presumably in Chinese, over the phone. Suddenly there was a crashing noise, a loud CLONG, and then silence. After the commotion at the other end died away, Ranma cautiously put the phone back to his ear and said, "Hello? Shampoo? Yeah, I'm feeling... okay at the moment. But something's come up. I really need to speak to your great grandmother."

He frowned as he listened to Shampoo's reply.

"You don't know when she'll be back? No. No, there's no need to come over. Yeah, I'm... I'm sure. I'll talk to you tomorrow, okay? Bye."

Ranma hung up and sagged against the wall. He muttered, "Now I wish I hadn't kicked the lech quite so hard. The old pervert's pretty useless, but he's better than nothing."

Akane gently put her hand on his shoulder and said, "Ranma, we can still go to the hospital right now. Maybe Dr. Tofu can spare a moment to look at you."

He slowly shook his head. "I... no, you heard Nabiki. He's got his hands full with Ryoga and Kuno. I've already done enough to them. How

can I butt in when he's trying to keep them alive? I'll check with him first thing in the morning."

"Are you sure?" Akane asked. "Maybe there's someone else we can talk to?"

Nabiki said acidly, "Like who? Gosunkugi? That Tarot-reading classmate of yours, Akane?"

Ranma blanched a bit. "You've got be kidding. And if you mean that girl who nearly got all of us poisoned with Akane's 'medicine', the answer is 'NO!'. I'm not THAT desperate." But under his breath, he muttered, "Not yet, at least."

It was an indication of Akane's worry that she barely reacted to Ranma's comment about her cooking.

He sighed and pushed away from the wall. "This has been one hell of a day. I'm going to change and go to bed."

Ranma slowly headed back toward the bathroom. Akane watched him with worried eyes. Turning to Nabiki, she asked, "Do you think he should wait? CAN he wait?"

"I don't know, Sis. But he's right. With Dr. Tofu busy and with both Cologne and Happosai gone at the moment, there really isn't anyone else to talk to about all this."

Kasumi said, "Oh dear. I guess no one's hungry anymore."

Akane sighed and headed for her room.

The doctor in question was slouched into a hard, uncomfortable chair, trying to savor his tea.

(Let's see if I have a chance to finish this cup.)

At about the eighth sip, the warning beeper went off -- again.

(No, I guess not.)

"Doctor! He's crashing!"

Dr. Tofu sighed and plunged back into the battle to save Kuno and Ryoga.

A half hour later, he was back in his chair with a fresh cup of tea. From the time he had received that terse call from Nabiki Tendo, Dr. Tofu had not been off his feet for more than five minutes. He had managed to stabilize the two young men when they arrived at the hospital -- but only temporarily. Since then, he had been forced to run back and forth between his two patients because of their tendency to go into either cardiac or respiratory failure without warning.

Digging into his pocket, he pulled out a small piece of paper. Thanks to Kasumi's note, he had a good idea about what was going on. The

real issue was how to fix it. The physical injuries were severe but certainly not fatal, not for these guys. If he could only restore the chi in their bodies, the physical injuries would heal in no time.

Easy diagnosis. Difficult cure.

But what the hell caused the disruption in their chi in the first place? And where are the others? He found it very strange that no one except Sasuke had stopped by to check on Kuno and Ryoga's condition. All he really knew was that the incident occurred at the Tendo dojo.

(Why haven't Akane and Ranma shown up, either as patients or to check up on Kuno and Ryoga?)

He glanced over the life sign monitors. Kuno was actually doing quite a bit better than Ryoga. That was surprising, considering Ryoga's much greater physical strength and endurance, not to mention his better martial arts skill. Plenty of questions and still no answers....

A different alarm began to chirp -- again -- and a weary, plaintive voice said, "Doctor...."

> Part 3g: THE GAPING ABYSS

Shampoo waited for Ranma to hang up, then she angrily slammed the phone down.

(Where IS great grandmother!?)

She despised Dan Xin as much as any other member of her tribe. Dan Xin's mother had been Shampoo's favorite aunt. And while they hadn't been close, Mousse had lost his mother because of Dan Xin's viciousness.

The Amazon girl knew why Cologne was taking Dan Xin's presence so personally. Dan Xin had been Cologne's chosen successor, her prize student. Her treachery was a massive personal affront to Cologne and totally unforgivable. Shampoo understood Cologne's need to punish Dan Xin for her numerous crimes. But dead was dead. Nothing could bring her beloved aunt back to life. And no matter what he said, Ranma needed Cologne's help and advice. And he needed it NOW.

She grimly promised herself that the next time she saw Cologne, she'd make the old woman listen to her, no matter what it took. Not even if she had to physically tackle Cologne to get her attention....

Shampoo turned to glare at Mousse who was struggling to crawl out of a heap of broken furniture even as he tried to remove a pot wedged onto his head. Mousse had made a total fool of himself, as usual. When he had answered the phone and immediately started to yell death threats to the caller, she had guessed that it was Ranma on the other

end.

Finally losing patience with his fumbling, Shampoo wrenched the pot off his head. As she did so, she shoved him into a chair and said, "Mousse, I want to say something and I want you to listen VERY carefully."

"Y-y-yes, Shampoo?"

"I am no longer interested in marrying Ranma so you have no reason to attack him anymore. Is that perfectly clear?"

Oddly enough, Mousse's first reaction was not pleasure as one might expect. Instead, he looked rather worried.

"Does... does Cologne know about this, Shampoo? She's bound to be furious."

She sighed wearily. "I was planning to tell her this afternoon. But then we had a... unwelcome visitor. Cologne went out to follow her and hasn't come back yet."

"Oh." Mousse was silent for a moment, then asked, "Why?"

"What?" Shampoo looked irritated.

"Shampoo, why are you suddenly giving up now? After all this time and effort?" He added quietly, "It has to do with this morning, doesn't it?"

Shampoo nodded curtly and stared silently at the floor.

Mousse went pale with rage. (Control, control,) he sternly reminded himself.

"Ranma... Did Ranma... do something to you after you sent me away?"

She gave him a slightly confused look, then realized what he was talking about.

"No! Ranma didn't touch me! I'm an Amazon, not some helpless outsider woman!"

"Then tell me why!" Normally Mousse would not have pushed the issue so far. But this time, he had to know whether Shampoo was really giving up on Ranma. Or was she going to change her mind tomorrow and go running back to his rival?

"It's none of your business! All you need to know is that I'm no longer interested in marrying Ranma, so leave him alone!"

Mousse bit his lip, then said, "Shampoo, I... I want to believe you. But how can I? You've been chasing after that ungrateful wretch for nearly a year and a half. Now you expect me to believe that you're giving up just like that? For no reason at all?"

"Mousse, you idiot! Do you think this decision was easy for me? Do you think that I WANTED to give up on marrying Ranma? I didn't! But you don't always get what you want! You, of all people, should know

that by now!"

Those words were like a slap in his face. However, he was more stunned to see a few tears seep from her eyes.

"You want to know why? Then I'll tell you." Her voice dropped low. "You know Ranma has a horrible fear of cats, right?"

He nodded carefully, unnerved by her intensity.

"When cats frighten him too much, he acts like a cat. And he uses the Neko-ken." Shampoo went on to give Mousse a concise summary of what happened that morning. By the time she finished, he had a sick, horrified look on his face.

"So that's why you...."

She quickly shook her head. "That's not the reason why I decided to give up, Mousse. You see, this morning, everyone else just saw him acting like a vicious cat. But I saw something truly frightening. It's a part of Ranma that has been hidden away from everyone -- even from himself."

Shampoo took a deep breath. "Ranma wants Akane. He's always wanted Akane. And he'll never give her up. NEVER."

Her chilling emphasis sent shivers up and down Mousse's spine. He had no doubts about her seriousness.

"I... I don't understand. I know he has feelings for Akane but...."

"I'm not talking of mere 'feelings', Mousse! I'm not even talking about love! This is something totally different. It's much more dangerous than that! It's... it's like a terrible hunger." She considered telling him more but settled for a simple warning.

She grabbed Mousse's sleeve. "After today, I'm afraid. If someone tries separate him and Akane, there's no telling what Ranma might do."

He blinked nervously behind his glasses. "If you're right, you've got to tell Cologne!"

"You fool! What on earth do you think I've been trying to do? But she's too busy to listen to me! She's off chasing Dan Xin...."

"WHAT!? Dan Xin's here in Nerima!?" A mixture of hatred and utter revulsion distorted Mousse's face as he launched into the most vile obscenities that he could think of.

> Part 3h: RESTLESS NIGHTS

Nabiki stirred uneasily in her bed. There were plenty of unanswered

questions, but one in particular nagged at her. Whoever set up the morning's incident obviously knew about Ranma's cat phobia and knew just how powerful the Neko-ken was. So why would anyone risk mucking around with the infamous Cat-fist?

He wouldn't, of course, unless it was critical to his plans... or unless the guy was a raving lunatic.

(Raving? No way. Too calculated. So what's so important about the Neko-ken?)

Nabiki narrowed her eyes. It certainly wasn't a simple martial arts challenge. No, this whole incident had a much 'dirtier' feel to it. There was something darkly personal about all this.

On the other hand, revenge was a very good possibility.

She stared blankly at her bedroom ceiling. Revenge for something Ranma did while he was in his 'cat mode' and using the Neko-ken? Revenge for a defeat in battle?

Revenge for a DEATH?

(I wonder what Genma hasn't told us about their travels. Could Ranma have...?)

It was all too possible. If it had simply been a matter of defeating an opponent, Genma would have surely boasted about it. However, if Ranma had crippled or even killed someone, THAT would be very different. Knowing his son, Genma would have every reason in the world to keep his mouth shut.

Nabiki could easily see how someone, obsessed with revenge, would find it wonderfully appropriate to kill Ranma while he was in his cat-frenzy... and to use felines to destroy so many of the important people in his life.

She shook her head. There was no way to be sure. Revenge seemed to be the most likely scenario but there were plenty of others. There just weren't enough facts. The myriad possibilities haunted Nabiki as she fell asleep.

Akane tossed and turned. She glared at the clock. She'd been lying in bed for hours and was no closer to sleep than when she started. She finally kicked off her covers and sat up as she reluctantly admitted what was bothering her.

Ranma, of course.

Akane silently opened her door and padded down the hallway to his room. She carefully opened the door and peeked inside. Ranma lay sprawled face down on his futon, snoring very softly.

(Doesn't that figure? I can't sleep a wink because I'm worried sick about that jerk. And what is he doing? He's sound asleep! Hmph!)

Akane stalked back to her room. But after another hour, she found

herself still awake. Off she went to check on Ranma again. He was still sleeping peacefully.

The third time it happened, Akane finally gave up any hope of rest that night.

(Oh, who am I kidding? I'm never going to get to sleep tonight!)

Finally, she snuck back into Ranma's room. Akane heaved Genma's futon against the wall and sat down in a huff. Wrapped in a blanket, she resigned herself to watching Ranma enjoying a good night's sleep.

(The insensitive jerk! Here I am, fretting my stupid head off and he's snoozing like he hasn't got a care in the world!)

A wry smile crossed her face. (Well, I guess I know who's the real idiot here.) She had to admit he looked very handsome, even with his mouth hanging open.

Akane remembered how she had run her fingers through Ranma's hair that morning. She then found herself suppressing an odd urge to do it again. She looked down at her fingers and wondered, (Strange. You won't think that that a guy's hair could be so silky... so soft... almost like fur....)

But soon after she settled down, Akane dozed off into a deep sleep. She was completely unaware of the lithe, black body that slipped through the open window and sat down on Ranma's futon. The small black feline stared down at Ranma for a moment as the young man continued to snore into his pillow. The feline then lightly tapped Ranma's head with its paw.

Ranma promptly rolled over onto his back.

The feline climbed upon Ranma's chest and twitched its whiskers before settling down into a comfortable crouch. There it stayed the entire night, staring silently into his sleeping face. Both Ranma and Akane remained blissfully oblivious of the cat's presence even as a ferocious thunderstorm rolled into Nerima.

Fire alarms rang and fire engines charged off into the night as the lightning storm touched off a blaze at more than one residence in the city. A newly rebuilt house was devoured in a matter of minutes despite the pouring rain and the best efforts of the fire department.

> Part 3i: UNNATURAL HUNGERS

Ranma found himself standing inside the darkened Tendo dojo. The walls and corners of the dojo were lost in shadows and only his immediate surroundings were clearly visible. He found the strange

lighting eerie and rather disturbing.

(How the hell did I get here? Don't tell me I'm walking in my sleep now!)

There was a soft, malicious chuckle from a darkened corner. Ranma spun around, ready for anything.

"Come on, man!" He stared into the darkness as he tried to make out the intruder. In response to his challenge, a tall man, dressed entirely in black, seemed to ooze forth from the shadows. With his opponent's face covered by a black face cloth, all Ranma could see of the stranger was a pair of darkish blue eyes. There was a slight crinkle around the eyes which hinted at a hidden smile.

"Who the hell are you?"

The only answer Ranma got was another malevolent chuckle. The stranger approached, then moved to circle around him. Ranma backed up and turned to follow, warily keeping his attention on the intruder.

"Hey! I'm talking to you! I want some answers!"

"You have some tasks to perform. And lessons to learn." The voice that answered was soft and rather pleasant to the ear. However, Ranma was in no mood to be pacified.

Ranma snarled. "Are you crazy!? You think you can waltz in here and tell me what to do? I'm not interested!"

"I'm afraid you don't have a choice."

Ranma's eye suddenly narrowed. (Aw, hell! I bet I've just been played for a sucker. Akane!)

He led with a swift slashing kick. The black-clad figure dodged easily. However, Ranma's attack was just a diversion. He lunged forward and bolted for the house. To his shock, no matter how quickly he ran, he couldn't seem to reach the doorway.

"Shit!" He spun to face the mysterious intruder. The man was nowhere in sight.

"It's not that easy, Ranma." The voice came from right behind him. Ranma dodged and punched, all in one smooth motion, but his opponent slipped away into the shadows.

The soothing voice murmured, "The only way to get out of here is to defeat me."

Ranma gritted his teeth. "And if I don't?"

A careless shrug. "You'll stay trapped here forever. Are you good enough?"

"I can do anything I damn well have to! If that's the way you want it.... HYAI!!!"

From that moment on, the stranger and Ranma were locked in battle.

The first moments of the fight were brutal, the pace unrelenting. The intruder was incredibly skilled... possibly a match even for Cologne. He used techniques and moves that Ranma had never seen before. But Ranma would not -- or could not -- let that stop him. Actually, he was glad that there was finally something tangible to fight.

However, somewhere along the way, the tone of the fight... changed. Ranma completely lost track of passing time -- but it didn't seem to matter. The surroundings subtly altered, losing any resemblance to the Tendo dojo.

Ranma didn't notice. Pain had no meaning. Physical exhaustion had no meaning. All that mattered was the lethal exchange of strike and counterstrike. It was a dance which drew him in and consumed him.

Each time the intruder tried a new move, Ranma observed his opponent's technique...

> <p>

...analyzed it...

> <p>

...dissected it...

> <p>

...made it his own...

> <p>

...used it or countered it as HE desired.

A faint smile appeared on his face. Let the others scorn or insult him at their own peril. This is what he was. This is where he excelled. This was his dominion. In this shadowy arena, on the field of combat, Ranma Saotome would admit no master.

> Part 3j: SHADOWS IN THE NIGHT

Ukyo sat up with a start. At first, she thought that the raging thunderstorm had awoken her. She then heard the sound of breaking glass downstairs. She jumped out of bed with a snarl and grabbed her battle spatula.

(If that's a burglar, the moron's picked the wrong person to mess with tonight!)

She was in a lousy mood and welcomed the opportunity to commit some serious mayhem. Ukyo prowled to the top of the stairs and listened angrily as the intruder threw the furniture around. The idiot seemed to be looking for something. She grimaced as she heard something else break.

Infuriated, she bounded down the stairs and slammed her hand down on the light switch. To her surprise, only a few of the lights came on.

Most of the restaurant was left in murky darkness. She glared around suspiciously, then stalked forward.

(Where the hell did the guy go? I didn't hear him leave....)

There was a scraping noise behind her. She whirled around and froze in shock as a man-sized monster lunged out of the shadows. Ukyo only had an instant to notice the black fur, the musky odor, the distinctly cat-like features...and the all too familiar, glowing green eyes. She frantically swiped at it but missed. A tremendous blow to her side sent her flying across the room.

She skidded along the floor and slammed into the wall hard. As Ukyo staggered to her feet, her head swam dizzily. The agonizing pain in her chest told her that she probably had a broken rib or two. Even worse, she was losing blood fast....

She barely managed to fend off a flurry of slashing blows. Watching the beast's claws leave long scratches on her metal spatula, the chef dazedly wondered, (What the hell!? What's with all these cat things!?)

The monster's next blow connected and knocked her to the ground. As the creature reared up over her, Ukyo clutched her spatula and struggled to stay conscious. She wasn't about to let herself be gutted like some pathetic rat.

(Legs... got to go... for the legs....) Every movement seemed to send knife blades through her chest but she doggedly lifted her battle spatula and took aim.

The cat creature dug its claws into the front of her shirt, dragging her closer. Just before the creature could rip her open, something hit it. The impact knocked Ukyo out of the monster's grasp, but also jarred her injured ribs. Everything started to go dark and she barely managed to get a look at her rescuer. It was a young woman expertly wielding a pair of large metal fans.

As Ukyo struggled to stand up, she could hear the sounds of intense combat in the background. There was a low snarl, the sound of smashing wood, and then silence, broken only by the persistent rumble of thunder and the patter of rain. Ukyo turned a bit too quickly and the world started to tilt. As her vision faded, she felt two strong arms supporting her.

A worried feminine voice asked, "Are you okay?"

"K-K-Konatsu?"

"Actually... uh... no."

> (end of Part 3) <p>

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> CREDITS: <p>

Additional inspiration from:

"The Whisper" by Queensryche

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"Hearts of Ice" by Krista Perry and "Nekophobia" by David Eddy for starting my obsessive interest in the neko-stuff.

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4. Part 4

> <meta name="generator"> Ranma 1/2 - Tiger Claw (part 4)

> TIGER CLAW
 Part 4: VISITATIONS

> ----- <p>

A Ranma 1/2 fanfic by Madamhydra@aol.com

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> IMPORTANT NOTE:

This is a continuation/ALTERNATE REALITY fanfic. While the story

follows the manga (and video) continuity to just after Mount Phoenix (volume 38), the subsequent wedding ceremony (and the related bombing by Shampoo and Ukyo) does NOT occur. In this story, a different incident involving the planned wedding took place.

> <p>

Only a limited number of the main characters have actually SEEN the Neko-ken (the Tendos, Genma, Shampoo, Cologne, Gosunkugi or Sasuke, and Kuno), although others may have heard rumors about it.

> Text Conventions

() and / / - thoughts

> <p>

- sound fx

> <p>

" " - Chinese

> <p>

Curse forms are denoted by appropriate suffixes (-chan, -neko, -panda, etc.) except for Ryoga (P-chan) and Mousse (Muu-Muu).

> Part 4a: THE FAMILY BUSINESS

Ukyo Kuonji woke up and instantly regretted it. She ached -- no, HURT -- all over. As she was trying to figure out what the hell was going on, a young woman walked in, carrying a tray.

"Hello, Ms. Kuonji. How are you feeling this morning?" The woman was in her mid-twenties. She was of medium height and looked quite athletic, but she was more striking than pretty. Her hair -- black with the occasional reddish brown highlights -- was cut short in a functional pageboy style.

"Who... who are you?"

"My name's Yuri." The woman placed her hand on Ukyo's forehead.

"Good, you're not running a fever."

The chef had vague, painful memories of getting prodded, poked, and bandaged. She tried to sit up and couldn't suppress a yelp of pain. Yuri gently but firmly pushed her back down onto the futon.

"You shouldn't be moving. Here, drink this." She offered Ukyo a glass of water and a straw.

After taking a few sips and catching her breath, Ukyo said, "How bad...?"

"Well, you've probably cracked a couple of ribs. On top of that, you've got a nasty set of cuts on your right side, maybe a slight

concussion, and a lot of minor bruises and abrasions."

Ukyo ran her hand along the tightly wrapped bandages on her torso. "You really seem to know what you're doing."

"Thanks. Some of those slashes were pretty deep. I had to put in a few stitches. Fortunately, my needlework is pretty good. As long as they don't get infected, you shouldn't have any major scars."

"If they were that bad... why didn't you take me to the hospital?"

Yuri gave Ukyo an odd look, then said abruptly, "Do you know what day this is?"

Ukyo frowned. "If I haven't slept through an entire day, it's Sunday."

"And how many fingers am I holding up?"

"Three. What's going on!?"

Yuri frowned and peered closely at Ukyo's eyes. "And you don't remember? I didn't think you hit your head THAT hard."

"Remember what?"

"You don't remember making a big fuss about going to the hospital?"

"I did?" Ukyo was getting more and more confused.

"Yes. You were amazingly stubborn about it." Yuri gave her patient a dubious look. "Listen, if you're having memory problems, I should probably take you to the emergency room right now."

Ukyo's thoughts drifted back to the night before. She suddenly flinched as she remembered what happened.

"The cat monster! The one that attacked me! What happened to it?"

"I managed to drive it away. I didn't get a chance to finish it off, though."

Ukyo gave her a wary look. "How did you manage to show up just in the nick of time?"

Yuri sighed. "You may not believe me but I have a certain... knack for being in the right place at the right time." She shrugged. "What can I say? It's a gift... or a curse, depending on how you look at it. I was walking nearby when I heard a disturbance inside your restaurant. My curiosity usually manages to get the better of me so I decided to investigate. When I took a look inside, that monster was about to rip your guts out. I couldn't just leave you there. By the way, you don't have a back door anymore. I think that's how the creature got into your place."

"You... don't seem at all shocked."

The young woman smiled ruefully. "Actually, I'm not. I've had a fair bit of experience with weird creatures. Dealing with supernatural threats is...." She paused as a flicker of sadness crossed her face. "I should say... WAS a family tradition."

"Was? Wha... what happened?" The question slipped out before Ukyo could stop herself.

"It's what usually happens when people mess around with the occult for too long. The Funada clan has a sworn duty to hunt and destroy evil -- you know, monsters, demons, ghosts, that sort of thing. Unfortunately, my family had a tendency to be somewhat... overzealous... in their activities. They made a lot of enemies over the generations. The consequences of their actions finally caught up with them." She made a sharp, expressive slashing gesture across her throat.

"But it sounds like you haven't given up... the family business."

Yuri sank down on a chair and stared down at her hands. "No, I haven't. For one thing, it's the only business I really know." She heaved a great sigh. "And second, there are a few matters of honor still outstanding.... debts that have to be settled."

Ukyo winced. "Believe me, I'm all too well acquainted with the demands of honor."

Yuri shook off her momentary sadness and resumed her nonchalant mood. "So you see, I was somewhat surprised to encounter a cat monster roaming around your restaurant, but it wasn't a terrible shock." She gave Ukyo a curious look. "I must say that YOU seem to be taking all of this pretty well yourself. Most people would be in screaming hysterics or acute denial right now."

"Well, I've run into some pretty strange stuff myself since I've been in Nerima. And considering what happened to me yesterday morning...." Ukyo looked away for a moment.

When it became clear that Ukyo was not about to discuss that particular topic any further, Yuri said, "That's not entirely unexpected. In certain circles, the Nerima district's developed quite a reputation for weirdness in the last couple of years."

The chef muttered, "Why doesn't that surprise me?" She hesitated a bit, then said, "So, how did you figure out my name?"

Yuri grinned at the slightly suspicious tone in Ukyo's voice. "Maybe because I read the restaurant sign? Or took a quick look at your mail?" She held up a couple of letters with Ukyo's name clearly visible. "It seemed a reasonable guess."

"Oh." Looking somewhat embarrassed, the chef shifted restlessly, then uttered a sudden, "Owww!"

Yuri immediately got up and reexamined her patient. "You need to stay still. I'm pretty sure that those ribs are only cracked but you're only going to make things worse by moving around so much. I'll get you something for the pain so you can go back to sleep."

As Yuri turned to leave, Ukyo said thoughtfully, "So I didn't want to go to the hospital...."

"That's right. You made a real big deal about keeping the whole incident quiet. It's a pretty understandable sort of reaction. Most people don't want the whole world to know they've had a close encounter with the supernatural." Yuri picked up the tray. "You also kept mumbling about this 'Ranma' person...."

Ukyo's face went stark white. In a flat voice, she said, "I did?"

Yuri nodded solemnly. "But I couldn't tell whether you were scared FOR him or OF him."

She stepped out of the room, but before she could shut the door, Ukyo called out, "Yuri, have you ever heard about something called the Neko-ken?"

She stuck her head back through the doorway. "The 'Neko-ken'?" Yuri frowned thoughtfully. "The 'cat-fist'?" She thought a moment, then shook her head. "No, can't say that I have. Why do you ask? Does it have something to do with that cat monster that attacked you?"

"No! No, it's...it's nothing...."

Yuri didn't seem particularly convinced by Ukyo's feeble protests, but she simply shrugged and left the chef staring blankly at her bedroom ceiling, lost in thought.

> Part 4b: FORESHADOWINGS

Ranma yawned, then stretched long and hard before opening his eyes. He stared at the ceiling in lazy contentment as he basked in the warm sunlight pouring through the open window.

(Mmmmmmmmm..... A good night's sleep. No interruptions. No nightmares. It's a minor miracle. Maybe my luck's finally changed?)

He frowned at the odd noise in the room. It certainly didn't sound like the raucous snore of his father. It was definitely a snore but it somehow sounded... daintier?

Ranma turned his head slightly. His eyes widened in surprise as he saw Akane sitting on his father's futon, sound asleep. Her mouth gaped open and her head was canted at an awkward angle.

(She's gonna hurt herself sleeping like that.)

He rolled over on his side to get a better look. He couldn't help thinking that she looked absolutely adorable, even with that little bit of drool coming from her mouth.

(Aw, man. I gotta be in love.)

He suddenly blinked, taken aback by the thought that had popped so easily and so naturally into his head. A bit rattled, he sat up and crawled over to her. In a soft voice, he said, "Akane? Hey, Akane?"

She continued to snore softly.

He reached out and gently shook her shoulder as he repeated her name.

Akane instinctively responded to the sound of a male voice where no male had any business being. Still half asleep, she swung her fist, hard. However, this time Ranma casually moved his head a bit to the side, letting Akane's punch whiff harmlessly past his ear. The force of her swing pulled her off balance and sent Akane toppling over. She awoke to find herself sprawled face down on Ranma's lap. For a dazed moment, she didn't react, then she suddenly made a hasty attempt to get up.

"What the... what am I...?" She jerked her head up a bit too quickly and felt a stab of agonizing pain as her neck muscles cramped.

"OW! Ow! Ow!"

"Akane? What's wrong!?" When he saw her clutching at her neck, Ranma immediately recognized the problem. "Oh, good grief. Let me do it."

She felt her fingers being firmly nudged aside as a pair of warm, callused hands gently began to knead her neck and shoulders. As the muscles loosened and the pain gradually faded away, Akane couldn't keep herself from relaxing and going limp. It felt so GOOD.... She wanted to whine in protest when the wonderfully soothing massage stopped.

"Uh, Akane?"

She blinked, then abruptly remembered just where she was. She quickly scooted off Ranma's lap and stared at the floor, her face flaming red with embarrassment.

"Your neck feeling better now?"

"Uh, yes. T-t-thanks a lot." She gave him a skittish, sideways look. Aside from a slightly concerned expression on his face, Ranma appeared to be quite calm and relaxed. It was if he had forgotten all about the worries and anxieties of the previous day.

"How did you....?"

He shrugged nonchalantly. "Come on, Akane. We've all handled muscle cramps before."

"Oh... right." She was beginning to think that her blush would never go away.

"Uh, what were you doing in my room, anyway?"

(Oh boy. He would have to ask that!) Akane looked away and mumbled

something under her breath. Her words should have been quite inaudible, but Ranma somehow managed to decipher their meaning.

"You were worried about me?" He gave her a surprised stare.

"Well, um...." When in doubt, attack. "Yes, I was! I couldn't get any sleep so I came in to keep an eye on you, okay? Are you happy now!?" Akane folded her arms and glared at him belligerently, daring him to say anything. Naturally, Ranma couldn't resist.

"Oh, Akane." He looked down and uttered a soft chuckle.

"What's so funny!?" she snarled furiously.

He glanced up at her. The faint grin on his face made Akane clench her fists. Before she could pummel him into the floor, he quickly put his hands over hers and said, "No, no! I wasn't laughing at you! Really! Thanks for the concern."

Akane gaped in blank astonishment. He wasn't making fun of her? He wasn't pulling his macho 'don't worry about me' act? She yanked a hand free and pinched herself -- hard.

"Akane? What are you doing?" He looked rather bewildered.

She muttered, "I'm not dreaming...."

"Huh?" Ranma looked even more confused.

"Nothing! It's nothing!"

"Okay, if you say so...." He cocked his head slightly and grimaced. "I think I just heard your Father's voice. And someone's coming upstairs."

She hadn't heard a thing herself but she scrambled to her feet anyway. "Oh no! I've got to get back to my bedroom! If he finds out I've spent the entire night in here...."

Ranma winced and quickly stood up also.

Any hopes of concealment were instantly dashed as soon as Akane opened the door. When they saw Soun, Nabiki, and Kasumi standing just outside Ranma's room, both he and Akane started to chatter at once.

"It's not what you think...."
> <p>

"I was just visiting...."
> <p>

"She was only in here for a moment...."
> <p>

"Nothing happened...."
> <p>

"Don't blow this all out of...."

> <p>

"It's no big deal...."

They continued for nearly a minute until the tense, anxious expressions on the other Tendos' faces finally registered. Even Kasumi looked badly worried. Ranma felt a chill enter his soul as the warm, fuzzy pleasure from his morning's interlude with Akane abruptly evaporated.

In a quiet voice, he said, "What's wrong?"

Soun coughed uneasily. "Son...." He then gave Nabiki a helpless look.

She uttered an exasperated sigh. "Ranma, during the thunderstorm last night, a lightning strike apparently set your mother's home on fire. It burned to the ground."

Akane's horrified gasp was covered by Ranma's shout of "WHAT!?" She could see his body tense as the memories and fears of yesterday come flooding back into his mind.

Nabiki held up her hands. "They're both alive. Hurt, but alive."

He snapped, "Where have I heard THAT before?"

She shook her head. "No surprises, Ranma. Dr. Tofu said your mother's suffering from severe smoke inhalation. Your father has a few second and third degree burns. But neither of them have anything truly life-threatening."

He took a deep breath and held it, then he quietly asked, "When did it happen? And why wasn't I told earlier?"

"I don't know. Maybe it just didn't occur to anybody at the hospital. Dr. Tofu called us as soon as he found out." Fortunately, Nabiki had been the one to answer the phone.

Ranma turned his back to the Tendos and retreated into his room. As he stared blankly out the window, they could see his right hand clench slowly into a fist.

Soun muttered, "Nabiki, don't forget to remind Ranma about... you know."

In a dismissive voice, she answered, "Sure, Daddy. I'll remind him about the appointment with Dr. Tofu."

With all the unpleasant tasks delegated to his daughter, Soun hastily headed downstairs. Kasumi trailed after him, murmuring something vague about breakfast.

Nabiki frowned. Ranma's reaction to the bad news was much too subdued for her liking. It made her uneasy. She had expected Ranma to go stampeding out the front door as soon as he'd heard about his parents. Instead....

She maneuvered her sister out into the hallway and softly murmured, "By the way, Akane, just WHAT were you doing in Ranma's room?"

"Nabiki!"

Her older sister merely raised an inquisitive eyebrow and patiently waited. Akane finally sputtered, "I couldn't get to sleep so I decided to see how Ranma was doing."

"And just how long were you 'checking' on him?" Seeing Akane's scowl, Nabiki made a small, placating gesture. "Just wondering."

Akane watched Ranma's stiff back. "I... most of the night."

"And...."

"And nothing. Nothing happened."

Nabiki looked more than a little skeptical. "Indeed?"

"I said nothing happened! Just what on earth do you think we were doing anyway?"

Nabiki sighed. "I wasn't talking about THAT. I just wanted to know if anything unusual happened. For example, did he have any dreams or nightmares?"

"No, nothing like that. All he did was sleep like a log. In fact, he certainly got a lot more rest than I did."

While Ranma appeared quite calm on the surface, his thoughts were in a state of turmoil.

He thought, (A fire?)

An inner voice murmured, / Big deal. /

(Damn it! It's a hell of a coincidence. I don't like it at all.)

/ Why get so upset? /

(Was it really an accident? Or was it a deliberate warning?)

/ Does it even matter? /

(Even though Mom and Pop weren't seriously hurt....)

/ Now that's damn too bad. /

> <p>

/ After what they've done.... /

> <p>

/after what they've said.... /

> <p>

/ They bloody well deserve to suffer. /

(If this was deliberate....)

/ Wish I'd thought of it sooner.... /

(Somebody's gonna pay.)

/ Oh YES. It's definitely time for paybacks. /

Ranma suddenly turned. "What about... Kuno and Ryoga?"

In the hallway, the two girls jumped at his abrupt question. Nabiki said, "The doctors managed to get them stabilized last night. Dr. Tofu says that they're no longer in any immediate danger. But it'll probably be a slow, hard recovery for both of them."

He closed his eyes and relaxed in visible relief.

"Visiting hours start at 11 AM, but Dr. Tofu wants to see you before then."

"You spoke to him?" Nabiki nodded in response to Ranma's question. "What did you tell him?"

Her gaze didn't falter one bit. "He wanted to know what happened yesterday morning. I explained things the best I could over the phone, but I'm sure he wants to see you in person. We can go to the hospital after breakfast."

He looked a bit startled. "'We'? You're coming along, Nabiki?"

"Ranma, do you have a problem with that?" The middle Tendo daughter gave him a hard stare.

He mutely shook his head.

"Dr. Tofu might ask some more questions -- questions that you won't be able to answer. I think that between me and Akane, we've pretty much got anything covered."

He glanced at the clock. It was just past eight in the morning.

"Ranma, there's no reason to go dashing over there right now. It's still too early. Why don't we grab something to eat before we leave? It's probably going to be a long day."

He dragged his fingers through his hair and muttered, "Yeah, you're probably right."

Akane headed back to her room as Ranma started to get dressed. He pulled on his usual black pants and shoes. Just as he was about to pull on his normal red shirt, a sudden impulse made him change his mind. He tossed it aside, then reached for a blue shirt instead.

Akane slowly brushed her hair. Of course she was worried about Ranma's parents, but she couldn't stop thinking about her early morning conversation with Ranma.

Instead of insulting her or making some stupid remark, Ranma actually thanked her. What was even more unnerving was the way he said it. No nervousness. No stammering. And he sounded totally sincere.

(Ranma was usually so skittish about his feelings.) Actually, she wasn't much better herself. But this morning, he seemed so confident....

No, that wasn't right. Ranma's confidence usually bordered on cocky arrogance. This was completely different. It just seemed like he was much more... comfortable... with what he was saying. That was really strange. She would have thought that the horrible experiences of yesterday would make him feel more uptight, not less.

(How peculiar.)

> Part 4c: DOUBLE-DEALING

"Double or nothing."

There was an exasperated sigh over the cellular phone, then Dan Xin's current employer said in a sharp female voice, "You've known all along that you'd be crossing paths with Cologne."

"While I don't mind dancing on the razor's edge, I certainly feel I should be adequately rewarded for doing so. And having that old ghoul hanging over my shoulder all the time is starting to get on my nerves." Dan Xin couldn't sense Cologne's presence at the moment, but she had no doubt that the old crone was lurking somewhere in the vicinity.

"I've already agreed to pay you a ridiculously large sum of money."

"So what? As I said, I want double or you can find someone else."

"You know that there IS no one else."

"That's not my problem. Pay me or you can go looking for a replacement."

There was a longish pause, then the employer said in a tense, chilly voice, "Fine. Same arrangement as before. Half to your designated account, half when this job is completed -- to MY satisfaction."

Dan Xin said snidely, "See, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

The woman ignored the taunt. "Since we appear to be renegotiating our deal, let me clearly define your job just so there's no misunderstanding. Your primary task is to keep Cologne occupied, but don't forget that you -- or rather, your people -- have an additional job to do."

"You mean, besides playing a self-propelled target for a crabby old woman? I remember, I remember," said Dan Xin in dismissive tones. "You also want the Shadow Scroll. Don't worry. My team's ready. But I wish that you'd simply tell me where the damn thing is."

"Because I still don't know its precise location. The only thing that's certain is that it's somewhere in Nerima. I'm currently in the process of narrowing down the location. It is a difficult task and I don't want your great grandmother interfering."

"Fine. You're the one paying."

"Please remember that fact. Now, I've already warned you about the martial artists in Nerima. As events progress, your subordinates will probably have some run-ins with them. You could lose some of your people. Do you have a problem with that?"

Dan Xin shrugged carelessly. "I don't care how skilled these youngsters are supposed to be. If my people can't handle some upstart teenagers, I consider them completely expendable."

"Very well. Oh, and a warning."

"What?"

"As I pinpoint the Shadow Scroll's location, I'll have some additional errands for you personally. The specifics of performing the errands will be up to you. However, whatever you do, do not harm or threaten Akane Tendo."

Dan Xin snapped, "Why not?"

"Because you'll make Saotome extremely angry. You won't be able to handle him in that state."

"Who says I can't!? Are you saying that I can't defeat a half-grown BOY!?"

The woman said very dryly, "That boy beat your cousin, the champion of your former village, with ridiculous ease. And your great grandmother seems to have selected him as her new protegee."

Dan Xin laughed contemptuously. "Is that supposed to scare me? Cologne would never consider a MALE worthy of learning her most powerful techniques."

Her employer's voice became softly taunting, "Indeed? But she taught him the Hiryu Shoten Ha. And he learned that skill in a matter of a few short days."

Dan Xin bared her teeth in a silent snarl.

"Just remember what I said. Good-bye." Her employer abruptly hung up.

Dan Xin glared at the phone.

(Not able to handle him, indeed! We'll just see about that....)

However, the anger in Dan Xin's eyes was soon replaced by the glitter of greed. The money was good but cash alone wasn't enough to lure her into a possible confrontation with Cologne. No, what she really wanted out of this job was the Shadow Scroll. According to legend, the Shadow Scroll pointed the way to a great treasure -- not of material wealth, but of arcane power. And if there anything Dan Xin coveted more than money, it was pure power.

She was content to let her employer do all the research. But once she got her hands on the Scroll, Dan Xin had no intention of handing it over to anyone. And once she mastered the Shadow Scroll's power, she'd finish off Cologne, then wipe those pompous fools of Joketsuzoku village off the face of the earth.

Yonoko put her phone away with a faint sound of disgust. She could practically hear the greed dripping from Dan Xin's voice. The money was of no concern to the sorceress. She could've easily handled Dan Xin's demands for ten times the amount. However, Dan Xin's conduct was SO unprofessional.

She shrugged away the annoyance. As long as the ex-Amazon did what she was told and didn't act prematurely, Dan Xin was free to play her little power games.

> Part 4d: BLACK ROSES

Earlier that morning Sasuke had snuck back into the Kuno mansion to air out Kodachi's room. He took special care to remove any traces of the black rose incense he had used to keep her sleeping throughout the night. Nabiki Tendo had warned him to keep Kodachi away from Ranma for 24 hours. Well, he had done as much as he dared. After he was finished cleaning up, he slipped away to inform Principal Kuno about his son's condition.

An hour or so later, Kodachi Kuno woke with a sore head and a foul mood -- fouler than usual, that is.

"SASUKE!" she shrieked. No answer. "SASUKE!" When the little ninja failed to appear, she threw on her frilly black bedrobe and stormed out of her room. She made a quick stop by her laboratory to chug down her own headache concoction -- one that drug companies would have paid handsomely for... if it weren't for a few minor, mood-altering side effects. Kodachi swept through the mansion, terrorizing the house maids and sending the other servants ducking for cover. She eventually ended up in the kitchens, still without finding any trace of the Kuno family's faithful retainer.

"SASUKE! You miserable little worm! Show yourself this instant!" She waited, tapping her foot impatiently.

There was a knock on the back door. Kodachi ignored it.

The knock came again. She continued to ignore the sound.

Someone knocked again and this time did not stop. Finally, she couldn't stand the incessant rapping and flung open the door.

"YES!?" she snarled.

The young, very handsome delivery man blinked at the vision of a beautiful lady, surrounded by clouds of black lace.

"Uh, uh...."

Kodachi, noticing her appreciative audience, instantly reverted to her demure, school girl persona. She tittered behind the back of her hand and pulled her bedrobe modestly around her.

"So sorry, ma'am. I was looking for Mr. Sasuke Sarugakura. I need to drop off a few packages addressed to a Ms. Kodachi Kuno."

She giggled again. The young man was still too bedazzled to notice the unnerving edge to her laughter. Wiser persons would have been running for their lives.

She tossed her head. "You're very lucky. I'll have you know that it's hardly the place of the mistress of the house to answer the back door."

He smiled and nodded eagerly. "Oh yes, ma'am! I never would've mistaken you for one of the servants!"

She preened a bit, then murmured, "You said something about packages? Bring them in. I'll have Sasuke sort them out later."

"Certainly." Soon the young man was carrying in box after box. "Uh, ma'am? There are four boxes from the Nashinaho Chemical Company, two packages from Hokkaido Horticultural Exotics, one box from Oki Pharmaceuticals, and a package from this Indian company that I can't pronounce. Please sign here."

Kodachi carelessly scrawled her name on the receipt slip and started to tear into one of the boxes.

"Uh, ma'am?"

"Yes?" she muttered irritably.

"I need you to sign separately for this particular package." The delivery man held up a small, plain parcel. Recognizing the company name, Kodachi snatched it from his hand, signed her name one last time, and shoved him out the door.

Her eyes glittered with excitement as she ripped off the paper. Inside the package was a plain but well crafted wooden box. She

opened it and found a slip of paper sitting on a pile of dried rose petals. Black rose petals.

The letter read, "Ms. Kuno. In response to your repeated inquiries about an obscure rose variety known as 'Umbra', we informed you several months ago that no such plant exists to our knowledge. However, it has come to our recent attention that this rose does in fact exist. This plant grows wild in the northern end of Honshu and is extremely rare. The only known grower of this rose is a horticulturist located in a town near Mt. Iwate. The address is as follows:....

"We cannot provide any guarantee as to the accuracy of this information or as to the alleged properties of this rose. However, since you are a highly valued customer and since you have expressed great interest in this plant, we are forwarding this information to you along with the entire sample sent to us. Sincerely, Koiaka and Sons, Imports."

Kodachi reached into the box and pulled out several petals. Even though they were dried, the rose petals was velvety soft and had a distinctly blue sheen when held to the light. She gently crushed a handful of petals and buried her face in them, intoxicated by their subtle scent.

"So this... this is the fabled 'Umbra' rose. And if the legends are true...."

She reached into the box for another handful and felt something sharp lying hidden beneath the petals. Carefully emptying the contents onto the tabletop, she found a single dried rose bloom. Kodachi picked it up and immediately cut her fingers on the large, vicious thorns completely covering the stem. But the pain was nothing compared to the elation filling her heart.

"Mistress Kodachi!"

Startled, she jumped and nearly scattered the precious rose petals all over the room. "Sasuke! Where have you been? I've been calling you for hours!"

"Forgive me, mistress. I went to inform your father about your brother's condition."

Kodachi's lips curled in a sneer. "And what did my esteemed parent have to say?"

Sasuke nervously scratched his head. "Uh, he was so busy with plans for the upcoming school quarter, I don't think he heard me."

She snorted. "He never paid much attention to either myself or my dear brother. Why should he care now?" She scooped the dried rose petals back into the box and carefully picked up the now bloodstained rose bloom.

"But Mistress Kodachi! Your brother's...."

She froze in mid-turn and said in an odd voice, "Does he live?"

"Yes, but...."

She swept her hair back from her face. "Well then, I fail to see what all the excitement's about."

"But...."

"But what?" she snapped.

"Something's terribly wrong with him, Mistress Kodachi. He seems to have gone quite... insane."

(Oh, Tatewaki....)

Kodachi ruthlessly crushed the brief flare of sentiment, then tossed her head and said airily, "My dear brother has always been notoriously feeble-witted. I suppose it was inevitable that his mind would snap one day."

"Mistress Kodachi!" Even after serving the Kuno family for so many years, Sasuke still managed to sound a bit shocked.

"Never mind my idiot brother. I want you to locate Ranma for me."

"Ranma Saotome!?" the little ninja squeaked.

She whirled around in a swirl of black lace and snarled, "What other 'Ranma' do you think I'm talking about?"

"But... but.... What will you be doing?"

"HO HO HO HO HO!!!"

Sasuke cringed under the onslaught of her maniacal laughter.

"I have to prepare a new addition to my toilette! Something that will make myself suitably enticing for my darling Ranma!" She scowled at the little ninja. "Well, don't just stand there!"

"Y-yes, mistress. I go!" He vanished in a blur.

Kodachi walked back to her bedroom and contemplated her plans. All her life she had been surrounded by shadows -- shadows of history, shadows of long faded family glory, shadows of her mother.... Her brother Tatewaki had chosen to lose himself in the past by spouting old, dusty poetry and playing the role of noble samurai warrior. Her father had gone the opposite path. Except for name, the elder Kuno had cast aside everything related to his family. Instead, he had chosen to wallow like a pig in the gaudy trappings of modern Hawaiian culture.

As for herself, Kodachi had been well on her way to being trapped in a shadowy half-existence like her brother. She played the demure schoolgirl, going through the motions expected of the daughter of an old and respected family. Just like a pretty doll.

Kodachi hated dolls.

She hadn't been truly alive until HE showed up. Kodachi sighed

wistfully. She could remember it perfectly, the first time she saw HIM. Even in the darkness of night, he had been so vibrant, so alive. As she had plunged to the ground, he had scooped her up in his arms. And in that moment, held tight against his warm body, she knew that if she could have Ranma, she would never have to worry about being lost in the shadows again....

(No. I'm not going to rot away in this old house, lost in some pathetic dream world like my poor fool of a brother. I want to live! And with Ranma by my side, I WILL!)

Even yesterday's incident did nothing to deter her. Her encounter with Ranma's feral side only seemed to confirm what she had sensed all along. Ranma was the sun and she coveted his light -- his vital energy -- like nothing else in her life. Even black roses needed the sun to grow. Everything else in her life had been mere wants. Ranma was a NEED. He was going to be her salvation and she would do anything, endure any pain, to make him hers.

And it won't be easy. She knew that the mannerisms that she used to dominate her world made him uneasy. She was also painfully aware that he didn't love her.

Her eyes drifted down to the box of black rose petals. According to the old scroll on herbs she'd found, the 'Umbra' rose could be used to make a scent that would awaken a man's deepest passions and desires.

Ranma might not love her, but she would take whatever she could get. And if it was only his passion, then his passion would suffice... for now.

And perhaps... just perhaps... love would come later.

At the moment, Kodachi's only worry was whether the dried petals would be potent enough. She would give it a try. And if the dried roses weren't strong enough, she knew exactly where she could obtain some fresh ones.

After she finished dressing, she took one last sniff of the dried Umbra rose bloom before dropping it back into the box, ignoring the numerous tiny wounds inflicted by the near razor-sharp thorns. Kodachi then headed for her lab, absently licking at the bloody cuts on her hand.

> Part 4e: UNQUIET MINDS

Lying unconscious in a hospital bed, Ryoga twitched and whimpered as hazy images flitted through his mind. There was one scene that kept repeating -- one of Akane glaring down at him.

(What is she shouting at me? I don't understand!)

The look of horror, shock, and anguish in her face was like a knife being plunged over and over again into his chest. His entire body

throbbed with pain. His gut felt as if it had been ripped open with dull hooks and the entire side of his face seemed like one huge gaping wound. But all his physical misery was nothing compared to the horrific feelings of guilt that threatened to drown him. He knew that he had done something terrible....

(Akane, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to hurt you!)

It was his worst nightmare. She knew. Somehow, she knew his darkest secret.

....P-chan....

But how... of course.

It HAD to be Ranma's fault.

Aloud, he muttered, "Ranma, you bastard...."

In a different wing of the hospital, Tatewaki Kuno thrashed restlessly in his restraints as a voice whispered softly in his mind -- a voice both urgent and plaintive.

[Master, I have awakened....]

"What? Who said that?" he muttered aloud.

[Master, where are you?]

"I... I don't know...."

[Master, the shadows....]

"Shadows...?"

[The shadows are stirring....]

"What.... what do you mean?"

[Come....]

"I...I can't." Kuno twisted helplessly in his bonds.

[Fulfill your blood's pledge....]

"Blood....?"

[Guardian, abide by your duty....]

"Duty? What...what duty?"

[To hunt down the darkness....]

"Darkness...?"

[And strike it from the earth....]

"Strike.... Yes...."

Kuno's soft laughter echoed in the room. "Of course... who else could be the blot of evil in this fair city.... Oh no. You're not going to escape so easily. I WILL destroy you...."

Dr. Tofu grimly watched as Kuno opened his eyes to stare vacantly at the ceiling. It was nothing more than a single whispered word, but that one word was spoken with a fierce, unshakable determination.

"Saotome...."

> Part 4f: CONSULTATIONS

Out in the Tendos' yard, Ranma stood holding a cup of cold water. He knew he needed to check out a few things before he saw Dr. Tofu. He took a quick breath and emptied the cup over his head. Shaking the water from her eyes, Ranma-chan first took a good look at herself.

(Damn it! I was hoping that the change in my girl-form was just a temporary thing. I guess not.) She shrugged. (Well, time to see what this body's got.)

Akane didn't have much of an appetite. Instead, she and Nabiki sat in the living room and watched Ranma-chan run through an extensive series of exercises.

"That's so weird....," Akane muttered.

Nabiki sipped her tea and said, "You mean that change in his girl-form?"

"Yes. I mean, what could have possibly caused something like that? Do you think the Neko-ken had something to do with it?"

Her sister shrugged, "Frankly, I don't see how the Cat-fist could have possibly affected his Jusenkyo curse. In the past, they seemed to be pretty much independent of each other. But who knows? Maybe Dr. Tofu has some ideas." She watched Ranma-chan strip off her shirt, exposing a white tanktop which clung enticingly to her body. Nabiki scrutinized Ranma-chan's new form with a critical and dispassionate eye.

"But I can say this much, Akane. If his girl-type stays this way, the boys at school are going to go absolutely bonkers."

Akane gave her sister a startled look. "What do you mean?"

"Take a good look, Akane. Ranma's girl-form used to be very cute and very pretty. Now I think she could give Ms. Hinako's grown-up body some serious competition. I'm not talking about mere bust size, but with respect to overall appearance. Imagine how she'd look with her hair down."

Akane buried her face in one hand and muttered, "Great, I used to have a fiance who's cuter than I am. And now he's more beautiful? Good grief!"

However, Nabiki had detected another change in Ranma-chan -- one that had totally escaped Akane's attention. And knowing Doctor Tofu, he probably wouldn't notice it either.

She couldn't really define it but there seemed to be an air of definite... femininity... about Ranma's female form that hadn't been there before. It was very different from the overblown, cutesy way he usually acted when he was pretending to be a girl. Whatever this intangible quality was, there was a naturalness about it that Nabiki found rather disturbing.

The new Ranma-chan was not a girl. She was a woman -- a young woman perhaps, but most definitely a woman. And a sexy one, at that.

(Oh, yes. Ranma's new form is going to attract the guys' attention, all right. Big time.)

Nabiki said nothing about this particular change to her sister. All she said was, "Does his new looks bother you?"

The youngest Tendo daughter gazed thoughtfully at Ranma-chan as the martial artist tested her balance on one of the big rocks edging the koi pond. She was silent for a moment, then said quietly, "It's strange. But... no, not really." She seemed to have forgotten her sister's presence.

"Ranma... is Ranma... is Ranma. It doesn't seem to matter whether he's a guy, or acting like a cat, or has a female body that could stop traffic. It's all still Ranma."

Akane scowled as she spoke, so it wasn't entirely clear whether she meant her words as a compliment, a statement of fact, or a complaint. Perhaps it was a little of everything.

Nabiki drawled, "That's an interesting point of view."

"HMMMMMM...." Akane muttered distractedly, not really paying attention to her sister. Nabiki couldn't blame her. Even after living in the same house for nearly two years, she still enjoyed watching Ranma work out. Of course, she was usually on the prowl for interesting photo opportunities but that didn't distract her from admiring a superb martial artist at work.

Nabiki adored competence in all forms.

Combine that with Ranma-chan's new body and Nabiki's fingers itched for her camera.

Ranma-chan finished her exercises with a graceful backflip off the rock. Carelessly slinging her discarded shirt over her shoulder, she walked over to Nabiki and Akane.

"I'll be right back after I take a quick shower."

Nabiki said, "Sure. There's no hurry."

A few minutes later, Ranma reappeared in his male form. As they briskly headed for the hospital, Akane said, "Nabiki, you mentioned that the fire was caused by... lightning?"

"That's what the preliminary investigation report said." Akane didn't bother asking how Nabiki had managed to gain access to that sort of information. "It's a perfectly reasonable explanation. Mrs. Saotome's house wasn't the only building to burn down last night. There were at least four other fires."

Ranma had remained quiet up to that point but he glanced up and said, "But we weren't supposed to get any rain all week, much less have a violent thunderstorm."

"Weather forecasts aren't perfect," Nabiki murmured.

"No, they're not."

Both Nabiki and Ranma fell silent, keeping their thoughts and suspicions to themselves.

The hospital receptionist was expecting them. As soon as they asked for Dr. Tofu, they were ushered into an empty examination room and told to wait.

When the doctor walked in few minutes later, his grim and exhausted appearance gave them a shock. He greeted them with a weary smile.

Ranma spoke first. "Doc, how's Kuno and Ryoga doing?"

"Ryoga's doing all right. He's recovering steadily but he hasn't regained consciousness yet. Kuno...." Dr. Tofu fell silent and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"What's a matter with Kuno?"

The doctor sighed tiredly. "Physically, Kuno's doing quite well. In fact, he's healing much faster than Ryoga." He paused a moment.

(And I can't explain that at all. Kuno should have been partially paralyzed, at least temporarily. When he came in yesterday, his X-rays indicated that he had several cracked vertebra. But this morning, the new X-rays showed no traces of any spinal injuries. And considering the way he's been able to thrash around....)

"Mentally, I'm afraid that's an entirely different story. I'm not sure of the cause but he's become alarmingly fixated on you, Ranma."

Nabiki murmured, "Kuno's always been obsessed about him, Doctor."

"I know, but this is a very different sort of fixation. From his ramblings, it appears that Kuno's now hearing voices -- voices that are apparently telling him that he has a sacred duty to destroy some dark and terrible evil. Namely, you, Ranma. We've had to put him under restraints to stop him from hurting himself and the hospital staff."

Ranma turned pale. "Oh man.... He was pretty wiggled out when he showed up at the dojo yesterday. He was waving around a real katana, not one of those wooden bokken he usually carts around."

Dr. Tofu frowned, "Now that's not good news."

Ranma paused, then softly said, "Doc, Kasumi said that there was something wrong about those guys' chi...."

Dr. Tofu hesitated a bit before answering. "Well, she was right. The physical injuries weren't the critical problem. Something had severely disrupted the flow of chi in their bodies."

"Disrupted? You mean like the stuff that Ms. Hinako keeps pulling with that stupid coin of hers?"

"No, that's completely different. Ms. Hinako only drains chi and battle auras. Her type of attack doesn't affect the pattern of chi flow itself. It only reduces the amount of chi a person has. Everyone usually manages to recover fairly quickly and it's not life-threatening. However, in Ryoga and Kuno's case, the actual patterns themselves were disrupted. That's why it was so hard to stabilize their condition. The disruptions manifested themselves in physical symptoms such as heart or respiratory failure. The treatment's fairly straightforward -- reestablish the correct patterns -- but it's rather difficult to accomplish in practice. It requires meticulous care and a good deal of concentration to reconstruct the patterns properly." Tofu ran his hand wearily through his rumpled hair. "Having to work on two people simultaneously only made things much harder."

"But you managed to fix them, right?"

"Yes, eventually." The doctor smiled reassuringly.

"Do you know what... what caused all this?"

"No, I don't." He saw the distress in Ranma's face. "Don't jump to conclusions. We know that the Neko-ken was responsible for the physical injuries but that doesn't necessarily mean it was responsible for the effect on their chi. From what Nabiki said, they were probably under the influence of a whole slew of magic spells. I'm no expert in that area, but I've heard that black magic can have a very nasty effect on a person's lifeforce."

Ranma didn't look too convinced by Dr. Tofu's words but didn't press the issue.

The doctor stared thoughtfully at him for a moment, then said, "Akane, Nabiki, if you'll excuse us for about 30 to 45 minutes? I want to get going on Ranma's examination."

Nabiki said, "Sure thing. Ranma, we'll just ask the receptionist

about your parents. And maybe check in on Ryoga." She gave Dr. Tofu an inquiring look. Before the doctor could respond, Ranma quickly said, "Could you guys wait a bit? Then we can go see him together."

"Ranma, are you sure you want to do that?" Nabiki said, her eyes narrowing slightly.

He ducked his head and muttered, "I'm worried about him too. And.... It's just that... well, something's really driven Kuno totally wacko. Ryoga may not be showing any obvious signs but we can't be sure that he hasn't been affected, too. I'd feel a lot better if I was around... just in case."

Nabiki waited a heartbeat, noted Ranma's white-knuckled grip on the examination table, then slowly nodded her head. Before Akane could argue, Nabiki grabbed her sister and towed her out the door.

"Why not? We'll talk to the receptionist and wait for you just outside, all right?"

"Thanks, Nabiki."

Once outside, Akane stared at her sister and snapped, "What was that all about? Now we've got to sit around here and do nothing for nearly an hour!"

"Take it easy, Akane. There's no harm in indulging Ranma a bit." Nabiki dug through the stack of magazines until she came across something worth reading.

Akane scowled at her sister. "There's something else going on here, right?"

"Hmm?"

"Come on, Nabiki. 'Indulging Ranma', indeed! What are you up to?"

"Akane, stop pacing and sit down."

Her younger sister threw herself into a chair and said, "All right, Nabiki. Talk!"

She sighed and said, "Akane, you can be so dense at times. Haven't you figured it out by now? He's just worried that something might happen to you if you wander off by yourself."

"Oh great!"

However, before Akane could start on her usual 'how dare he think I can't take care of myself' tirade, Nabiki hastily added, "Considering everything that's happened, I think Ranma's entitled to feel a little bit paranoid. Or do you think that fire last night at his parents' house was just a convenient 'accident'?"

"You don't think...!" Akane suddenly looked uneasy.

"I know that coincidence runs rampant here in Nerima, but this time? Not bloody likely."

Akane frowned, then with a mixture of suspicion and confusion, she said, "Nabiki, I've been meaning to ask you something. Why are you suddenly being so... so helpful?"

Without looking up from her magazine, Nabiki calmly said, "You can consider it a sort of payback."

"What do you mean by THAT?"

"Why don't you try to figure it out for yourself? Think of it as practice." Nabiki closed the magazine and looked at her sister. "Akane, you're not very good at understanding what motivates people. The problem is that you're lazy. You always want things spelled out for you in big letters. But that's not the way real life works. I'm not going to be around forever to tell you what's really going on or to hold up cue cards when you get into complicated situations."

(Akane, you were always the baby of our family. You never had to do anything more than just be yourself. Well, those days are over. Time to grow up, kiddo.)

Staring down on her hands, Akane muttered, "But... but I'm not any good at this sort of thing...."

"Exactly my point. It's very similar to marital arts -- it takes constant practice, you screw up a lot, and you get hurt. The big question is whether you care about Ranma enough to even try." With those words, Nabiki opened up her magazine again and began reading.

Akane stared to her sister for a moment. When it became clear that Nabiki had nothing more to say, the youngest Tendo daughter settled into her chair to do some hard thinking.

After the most thorough examination that he could manage, Dr. Tofu's only conclusion was that Ranma was in his usual superb physical condition. Taking into account the emotional stress that Ranma was under, there was nothing abnormal about his aura or his chi, either. Dr. Tofu found the very lack of symptoms puzzling and somewhat worrisome. Something as traumatic as the fight yesterday should have had SOME noticeable effects.

"Doc?"

"Hm?" Dr. Tofu stared at him distractedly.

"How about it?"

"Oh. Well, Ranma, based on my examination, I have to say that you're in excellent shape. Frankly, I can't find anything wrong with you. Your Jusenkyo curse is still there, of course."

"Uh, Doc, didn't Nabiki tell you anything about what happened during

dinner last night?"

"Well, she did mention something about the curse, but she said that I'd simply have to see it for myself."

Ranma heaved a sigh. "Can I have some cold water?"

After Dr. Tofu wordlessly handed Ranma a cup, the young man slid off the examining table and poured the water over his head.

For a brief instant, the doctor thought that Ranma's Jusenkyo curse had been miraculously cured, but then he quickly realized that while Ranma's height and hair color hadn't changed, he still turned into a girl. No, that wasn't really accurate. Ranma-chan was now a young woman -- and a stunningly beautiful one at that.

"How did THIS happen?"

Ranma-chan shrugged helplessly. "It just... did. Happosai was up to his old tricks with the underwear. He splashed me with some water and...." She gestured to herself.

"Well.... Happosai is always running off to Jusenkyo. Are you sure that he didn't hit you with some new variety of cursed water?"

"Nope. Akane said that he used one of the vases in the room so I'm pretty sure that it couldn't have been the water itself."

Dr. Tofu absently noted that even Ranma-chan's voice had changed. While still unmistakably female, it was no longer quite as high-pitched as before. And it sounded... well, he couldn't find any other way to describe it except as 'richer'. A less dispassionate observer might have called it almost... sultry.

The doctor sat down on a stool and murmured, "Well, this IS an interesting development." He gave Ranma-chan a thorough visual examination. "Now your female form's much more similar to your normal male form, both in height and in age. Hmmm.... How's the change in body size affected your speed and strength?"

"The change... hasn't reduced my girl-form's speed. At all." Ranma-chan bit her lip anxiously, then whispered, "In fact, I think I'm even a bit faster now...."

Dr. Tofu raised a startled eyebrow. If that was true -- and he saw no reason to doubt Ranma-chan's assessment of her own abilities -- her speed would now be truly phenomenal. "I see. And the strength?"

"I... don't know. I haven't noticed any real difference, but the only way to really find out is to get into a serious sparring match or a fight."

"Hmmm...."

After a splash of hot water returned Ranma back to his male form, he fidgeted uneasily. "Doc, it's not that I LIKED being a cutesy girl, but this is... really kinda scary. I mean, all the previous stuff I've tried barely put a dent in my curse and now this, on top of

everything else that's happened to me...." His voice wavered slightly.

Tofu gave Ranma a reassuring pat on the shoulder. "I know that your cat phobia and the Neko-ken really bother you...."

"Bother me? Doc, you don't know the half of it." He fell silent for a moment, then murmured, "I hate it. All my life, I've been taught how important it is for a martial artist to have self-control. In combat, if nothing else. But I've got absolutely no control over my cat-side. It just does whatever it wants...."

"You do realize that your cat-side is only acting out your innermost feelings."

Ranma hunched his shoulders as his face turned bright red. "Yeah. The stuff with Akane... that's as embarrassing as hell but I could deal with it. But that's not what scares me." In a whisper, he said, "I'm afraid that if I'm really... angry at someone, my cat-side will actually DO something about it. And now that I know what it's capable of...."

"It's not your fault...."

"Doc, it IS my fault. It's my fault because I let this whole stupid cat thing go on. I should have just told Pop to shove it and done something about it long ago! But no, I kept making excuses!"

"Ranma...."

He stared at his hands. He thought he could still catch the faintest scent of blood on them, even though he had washed his hand repeatedly.

"Can you understand, Doc? I used to just shrug it off and ignore it because nobody really got hurt. Akane says that I like fighting. I guess I do. But I always had the choice of stopping if and when I wanted to. This time, it was totally different. This isn't a matter of just beating someone up or defeating them. This is about murder. I came too damn close to killing Ryoga and Kuno. And the worst thing of all is that I didn't NEED to. If Akane hadn't stopped me...."

Dr. Tofu watched Ranma with sympathetic eyes. Nabiki had told him all about how Akane had been forced to literally put her hand in Ranma's mouth to stop him from ripping open Ryoga's throat.

"Doc, I totally blanked out just after Kuno and Ryoga showed up. The last thing I remember was those idiots charging into the compound yelling something about a stupid wedding between Akane and me. The next thing I remember is waking up in Akane's room. I was all covered in... blood." His voice was quiet, empty of emotion.

Staring vacantly as his mind replayed the events of the last day, he whispered, "It was everywhere. On Akane, on me... my hands, my clothes... I could even taste it...." Ranma closed his eyes.

The doctor gave Ranma a badly worried look. Nabiki said that she didn't think there was an immediate danger of Ranma killing himself -- emphasis on 'immediate' -- but she had been rather vague about her

reasons. Admittedly, Nabiki was very good at reading people, but she was still young and hardly a certified psychologist. Then again, neither was he....

Tofu decided to approach the issue indirectly. "Are you thinking of... going away?"

Ranma instantly shook his head. "No, I can't. It's way too late for that. Akane and her family's all tangled up in this mess. I won't desert her." He suddenly looked up at Tofu. The doctor was taken aback by the cold, fierce gleam of determination in those blue-gray eyes. "Someone tried to hurt Akane. There's no damn way I'm leaving her alone and unprotected."

Dr. Tofu sighed quietly. "I understand your position, Ranma. I just wish I could give you some reassurance. Unfortunately, there's so little reliable information about the Neko-ken.... It's mostly rumor and speculation. Have you talked to Cologne?"

"I tried. Shampoo said that the old ghoul's off on some personal errand. There's no telling when she'll show up again."

"I see. Well, ever since I found out about your problems with cats, I've been doing research and asking my associates about it. Sad to say, but I haven't found too many answers. I'm sure you know that there are quite a number of cat-based martial arts styles."

"Uh-uh. Tiger, leopard.... I've used some of their moves."

"All right. Like many other animal fighting styles, they're based on creatures in nature. The Neko-ken's quite a bit different. It is a cat-based fighting style but one that utilizes chi to an extent that most styles never dream of, simply because most martial artists can't manipulate their chi to the necessary degree. For example, when you use the Neko-ken to shred objects like wood, metal, or stone, you're actually using extremely focused chi to do that. Your hand almost never touches the object you're cutting. You're basically generating a psychic 'blade' or 'claw'."

"Uh, Doc, how did you find out about all the stuff I do when I'm using the Cat-fist?"

Dr. Tofu smiled faintly. "Akane told me. She asked me a lot of hard questions about the Neko-ken right after that first incident at Furinkan High. She wanted to know what she could do to help you. Ever since then, she's been keeping me up to date every time you've used the Cat-fist." He cocked his head slightly. "I hope you're not mad at her for consulting me behind your back. She's been quite worried about you and you've been very reluctant to discuss the matter directly."

"I... I didn't know that." (Good grief! She's been doing this for nearly a year and a half? All this time, while I've been blowing this stuff off, she and Dr. Tofu have been researching the Neko-ken? And the only times I ever discussed the Cat-fist with Dr. Tofu at all was because SHE brought up the subject first.)

"Akane even gave me a videotape involving your battle with Cologne and a giant shark. I think Nabiki got the video from one of the bystanders on the beach."

Ranma dropped his face into his hands and groaned, "Oh great! If Nabiki had her hands on it.... Hell, I'm just surprised she hasn't passed it around school. For a suitable rental fee, of course."

Dr. Tofu blinked. In a startled voice, he said, "You haven't seen it yourself?"

Ranma silently shook his head.

"I thought...."

He said flatly, "Doc, I've never seen myself in the Neko-ken. Pop did his very best to ignore it. Whenever I woke up after going 'cat', he'd yell at me for being a weakling and drag me off for an extra heavy-duty training session."

Although Dr. Tofu's mild expression didn't change, he was entertaining some very uncharitable thoughts about the elder Saotome. (That moron....) Aloud, he gently said, "Would you like to see it?"

"....Yeah. Maybe later?"

"Just give me a call and I'll show it to you. Hm. Before I go any further about the Neko-ken, maybe we should ask Akane and Nabiki to join us. Unless you mind?"

"I... I don't mind about Akane, but Nabiki...." His voice trailed off as he instinctively balked at exposing what he considered a major weakness to Nabiki's prying eyes. (But considering all the stuff that happened yesterday....)

Ranma threw up his hands. "Aw, hell. Why not? They're both up to their necks in this damn mess."

As he went to call the girls in, Dr. Tofu hesitated. "Ranma, I've been meaning to ask you about Ukyo. I saw her a few days ago and she seemed... well, rather unhappy. Did you....?"

Ranma looked away uneasily. "No. I haven't said anything about that stupid love potion she used on me."

"Why not? What are you waiting for?"

"I... don't know. I guess it's because... I want her to tell me on her own."

"I see."

"Am I expecting too much from her?"

"I don't know. Maybe you are."

Ranma's voice held equal parts of anger and pain. "Shampoo admitted her part in that mess. Ukyo should have at least THAT much honesty."

Dr. Tofu said, "Ukyo worries too much about your opinion of her. That's probably why she's been afraid to say anything to you."

"Ukyo's smart, pretty, nice... she's a good person. But she should already know that for herself. She shouldn't need me to tell her that!"

Dr. Tofu sighed. "Some people don't have enough belief in their self-worth so they rely on other people's opinions too much. Besides, it's only natural for Ukyo to worry about the opinions of her closest friend. She's just afraid that you'll hate her for what she did."

"I don't hate her."

"But you're angry because you feel betrayed."

"....Yes." Ranma looked away. "I thought I could trust her but...."

"You'll have to decide how to handle this. But it might be best to just get this all out into the open," Dr. Tofu said quietly.

"Yeah. I'll keep that in mind, Doc." Ranma gritted his teeth in frustration. "I never asked to be the center of Ukyo's, Shampoo's, or Kodachi's life."

"But you seemed to like it at first. And I remember all the things you did when you thought Shampoo wasn't interested in you anymore. You know, that 'contrary' jewel incident?"

Ranma flushed and muttered, "Yeah, now that I think about it, it was a pretty stupid and mean thing to do. But it was kinda cool at first, you know, having them hang around. With all the travelling Pop and I did, I never really got to know any girls who were interested in me. But things just started to get crazier and crazier. And now that I want to get out of this mess, I can't."

"So you've finally come to a decision?"

Ranma whispered, "Doc, I don't think there was ever any real decision to make."

(I think I fell in love those first couple of weeks. I was just too stubborn to admit it to anyone -- even myself.)

"But in a way, that only makes things worse. I've let this situation go on and on for way too long. How am I supposed to tell the other girls about all this? I can't just go up to them and say 'Gee, too bad, but you never even had a chance.' That'll make them REALLY happy."

Dr. Tofu sighed quietly.

"The only good thing that's come from that fight yesterday is that Shampoo doesn't seem to be interested in marrying me anymore."

"Well, that's one third of your problem gone."

"Yeah, but that leaves Ukyo and Kodachi...."

"Hm. I can imagine how difficult it'll be trying to deal with those two girls. I get the impression that they're both extremely stubborn. It's going to be very hard to convince them that you've chosen Akane of your own free will...."

"Try 'impossible', Doc."

"And they might take their pain and anger out on Akane. Is that what you're really worried about?"

With his back turned, Dr. Tofu couldn't see the odd, half smile that flitted across Ranma's face.

"You're right, Doc. I HAVE been worried about that possibility. But I've also recently decided that I need to make matters perfectly clear to them. They're just gonna have to learn that I'm absolutely serious about Akane...."

In a distant corner of Ranma's mind, something cheerfully whispered, /....even if it kills them. /

When Dr. Tofu peered out into the reception area, he saw Nabiki quietly engrossed in the business section of the newspaper while her sister slowly paced back and forth.

"Akane? Nabiki? Would you mind joining us in here?"

As soon as she entered the examination room, Akane glanced quickly at Ranma. He turned his head and gave her a slightly bemused look in return as she demanded, "Well, how is he?"

Dr. Tofu smiled. "He seems to be fully recovered from the fight yesterday. As for the rest.... I was just telling him what I've discovered about the Neko-ken."

Nabiki saw her sister's cheeks turn slightly red. (Ah! Interesting reaction there....)

Ranma said quietly, "He said that you've been telling him all about... what I do when I go 'cat'."

Akane blushed even more. She huffed and snapped defensively, "Well, it wasn't as if you were doing anything about it yourself and...."

Ranma cut her off with a soft, "Thanks."

Akane blinked, shuffled her feet, and mumbled an awkward, "Um...."

He continued to give her that slightly bemused look, but inside, Ranma felt a sudden, crazy impulse to touch Akane. From that very morning, he could still remember the feel of her skin under his fingers... the scent of her hair.... If it hadn't been for Dr. Tofu and Nabiki's presence, he might have given in to that impulse and to hell with the consequences.

The doctor broke the mood by cheerfully saying, "Well, I was just explaining how the Neko-ken differs from other cat-based martial arts."

Nabiki said, "You mean in its integral use of chi techniques."

Everyone's eyebrows shot up in astonishment.

Akane said, "Nabiki, how did you...?"

The middle Tendo daughter shrugged nonchalantly. "Information on the Neko-ken isn't THAT hard to find. The real trick is sorting out the few credible tidbits from all the overblown myths and legends."

"Gee, does everyone know more about the Neko-ken than me?" Ranma muttered plaintively.

Akane glared at her fiancée. "That's not hard, considering how much energy you spend trying to ignore it!"

Ranma glared back at her. "You're damned right!"

"Whoa, whoa! Time out, guys. I think Dr. Tofu has a bit more to tell us."

"Thank you, Nabiki. Most martial arts can be practiced and used in combat without employing focused chi. Naturally, if you can manipulate your chi, that enhances the effectiveness of any martial art form. However, according to my friend Dr. Kayuga, the Neko-ken is extremely unusual because it requires not just the ability to focus one's chi but it requires a mastery of chi manipulation before a practitioner can even begin to utilize a single move."

Dr. Tofu gave Ranma a quizzical look. "It's astounding that you had that necessary ability when you were only six years old. No wonder you picked up all those other chi techniques so easily."

Ranma smiled sourly. "Thanks for the compliment, Doc, but I would have preferred to avoid the whole cat thing all together."

Akane frowned, "Just how many martial artists ever learned the Neko-ken?"

"No one knows with any certainty. By rumor, a bare handful of martial arts masters. And certainly no one within the last 200 years or so."

Nabiki reached into her shoulder bag and pulled out a battered green booklet. Ranma said, "Hey, isn't that...?"

"Uh huh."

Akane blurted, "Nabiki! How did you manage to get your hands on it?"

"I took the liberty of looking through Mr. Saotome's things." Noting Ranma's scowl, she murmured, "You have a problem with that?"

"No. I just wish I'd thought of it first," he grumbled.

"This is the manual that Ranma's father used to 'train' him in the Neko-ken. I didn't find it too informative but maybe you can get more out of it, Doctor."

"Thanks, Nabiki." Dr. Tofu took the book and read the title aloud, "'The Anything Goes Martial Arts Final Attack Cat Fist'. Interesting." But as he quickly flicked through the tattered volume, a frown appeared on his face.

"What's wrong, Doc?"

"Now this IS strange."

"What!?"

"This book contains pages and pages extolling the virtues of the Cat-fist. Plenty of discussion about its power, what it can do, how it's unbeatable, etc. But except for that single mention of the 'pit of starving cats' technique...." Ranma shuddered visibly. "....It doesn't disclose a single thing about HOW to learn the Neko-ken. There are no guidance, no beginner's moves.... nothing."

Nabiki chuckled. "Sounds like an advertising brochure. All flash, no substance."

"Then how on earth did anyone ever learn the stupid thing without the you-know-what method?" Akane muttered crossly.

"I don't know." Dr. Tofu continued to skim the booklet, looking for clues.

In a more serious voice, Nabiki said, "I noticed that it describes the ability to slice through almost anything, but it doesn't say anything about the other things that happened... the battle aura and stuff like that."

Akane frowned. "But how do we know that the cat-shaped battle aura we saw yesterday actually has anything to do with the Neko-ken? It could just be Ranma's natural battle aura. I mean, if he thinks he's a cat, why wouldn't his battle aura look like a cat?"

"That's a very insightful observation, Akane," Dr. Tofu said thoughtfully.

Nabiki said, "There's just one minor problem. From everything I've heard, that was no normal battle aura. The way Shampoo described it, the aura actually seemed to have physical substance...."

Akane scowled, then said, "Well, there was so much weird magic floating around during that fight.... Couldn't that aura be caused by some sort of magic spell?"

Ranma sputtered, "Spell? What magic spell?"

Akane touched his arm and said, "I can't be sure, Ranma, but your cat-phobia kicked in way BEFORE Kuno and Ryoga changed into those tiger monsters. And... and there were other things wrong." She winced as she remembered Ranma's soft cries of pain and how he had begged

for the torment to stop....

"You think someone slapped me with a magic spell to set off my fear of cats? But why? This guy had to know that I was sure to freak out anyway once Kuno and Ryoga... changed."

Akane could only shrug helplessly.

Dr. Tofu said, "Hmmm, battle auras. You're right, Nabiki. There's no mention of anything like that in this manual and nothing in my research ever remotely suggested the possibility of such a thing. But it certainly sounds like something that would fit right in with what we know of the Neko-ken. Think about it. What is a battle aura except a powerful outward manifestation of one's chi? And chi manipulation appears to be a hallmark of the true Neko-ken."

Nabiki murmured, "Now that's an interesting omission. How does that old saying go? 'Things left unsaid are just as important as the things said.'"

Ranma pounded his fist on the examination table. "Damn it! Where's Cologne!? She's the only one who really knows anything about the Neko-ken!"

Dr. Tofu frowned. "Considering her age, it's just possible that she might have actually fought a Cat-fist adept many, many years ago. And survived, which would say a lot for her skill."

Nabiki said, "I'm pretty sure that's the case."

The doctor blinked in surprise. "Really?"

"Yes, during that fight on the beach. With the shark. I believe she said something about running into the Cat-fist before."

"Hmmmm. That makes it even more important that we talk to her."

Ranma sighed and said, "You got anything else to tell us, Doc?"

"Not at the moment."

"Then... can we see Ryoga?"

"Yes, I'll tell the nurse to let you make a quick visit. I'm sorry, but you won't be able to see Kuno."

"I... I understand. If you find out anything...."

"I'll let you know."

While Nabiki stood outside chatting with one of the nurses, Ranma and Akane walked into the ward where Ryoga was resting. Ryoga was almost completely wrapped in bandages. The few parts of his body that weren't covered showed heavy bruising and nasty-looking scratch marks.

"Aw, man...." Ranma shuddered.

A passing nurse whispered encouragingly, "It's not nearly as bad as it looks. The doctors are almost positive that he won't lose that eye. And the scarring should be minimal."

Ranma stared at his rival and occasional friend. Unconsciously, he reached for Akane's hand and held it.

(Why did you do it, Ryoga? From the way you were acting, you HAD to have some idea of what was going to happen.)

/ She's MINE. /

(You knew and you did it anyway. Was beating me THAT important to you?)

/ Try something like that again.... /

(Why won't you just give up, you idiot?)

/and I'll kill you.... /

(Can't we just be friends?)

/slowly.... /

Akane whispered, "Uh, Ranma?"

"Hm?"

"My hand's going numb...."

He glanced down to see Akane's fingers turning white from his tight grip. He quickly loosened his hold and would have released her hand completely but Akane clung to his fingers.

She muttered, "Just... not so tight, okay?"

Even in the dim light of the hospital ward, Ranma could see Akane blushing furiously. He felt a similar warmth flooding his face, too.

"Um... sure thing."

He jumped as Ryoga suddenly uttered a soft moan. The injured teenager stirred restlessly and mumbled piteously, "No... Akane.... I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have... couldn't stop... being... p... p...."

(Oh, shit! The idiot's gonna blab all about being P-chan!) As Ranma frantically tried to figure out a way to get Akane out of the room, Nabiki stuck her head into the ward and whispered, "Your time's up, guys. The nurse says that he really shouldn't be having any visitors at all."

"You're perfectly right. Come on, Akane."

She looked a bit startled as he quickly dragged her away from Ryoga's bed, but Akane managed to keep her mouth shut.

(Poor Ranma. This whole affair must be terribly difficult for him. Guilt must be eating him alive. And it's really not his fault at all.)

Out in the hallway, Ranma leaned his head against the wall, overcome by a turbulent mixture of guilt and relief. He muttered, "He looks like he'd been stuffed through a shredder. What did that nurse say? '...won't lose that eye... scarring should be minimal'? And Kuno's gone really nuts this time."

"Ranma...." Akane put her hand on his shoulder and he leaned slightly into her comforting touch. She could find nothing else to really say. Awkwardly, she murmured, "The receptionist said that your father and mother are two floors down."

He reached up and touched her hand, then straightened. "Yeah, let's finish this."

Akane's little gesture of support had not gone unnoticed. One of her classmates saw Ranma and Akane standing in the hospital hallway. She bumped into some friends shortly afterward and naturally told them about the incident. Other people happened to overhear some, but not all, of her story and their overactive imaginations easily filled in the rest.

Within a day or two, the Nerima gossip machine would turn a moment of awkward sympathy into something considerably different.

> Part 4g: PARENTAL UNITS

They made a quick stop to see Genma. Ranma's father was loudly snoring in his bed. Except for a few burns on his arms and shoulders, he was basically unhurt. That wasn't entirely unexpected. The elder Saotome had always had a superb instinct for self-preservation.

Ranma gingerly approached his mother's bed, then flinched slightly when he noticed what his mother was holding. When the nurse saw Ranma staring at the sheathed katana tightly clutched in Nodoka's hands, she shrugged helplessly and said, "We tried but we couldn't get her to let go of it."

As he stared down at his dozing mother, he thought wearily, (Why doesn't that surprise me at all?) He closed his eyes and struggled to put together a calm facade. (This isn't the time to argue about it.)

Ranma edged closer to the bed. He paused briefly to listen to her harsh breathing, then softly whispered, "Mom...."

Nodoka's eyes flickered open, then widened in apprehension. That apprehension vanished as soon as she realized that she still had her sword. Only then did she notice her son standing by her bedside, patiently watching her.

"Ranma...." Her voice gave way to harsh, racking coughs. Unable to speak, she awkwardly clutched her son's arm with one hand. The other hand kept its fierce grip on the katana. Even now, she was unwilling to completely relinquish her hold on the family weapon.

He put his hand on her shoulder and said gently, "No, you just rest. We'll have plenty of time to talk after you get better."

Nodoka smiled gratefully at her son, then closed her eyes and relaxed, letting her hand slip from Ranma's arm.

Akane and Nabiki watched the brief conversation from the other side of the room. Akane had a tense scowl on her face. She didn't like to see anyone in pain, but she wasn't about to forgive Nodoka so easily.

Ranma didn't say anything, even after they left his mother's room. However, he couldn't quite suppress a bitter smile.

Since he certainly seemed calm enough -- maybe a bit TOO calm -- and since Akane appeared to have taken her advice to heart, Nabiki decided to leave the two to their own devices. She casually said, "Well, I've got a few errands of my own to run. What about you guys?"

Ranma looked a bit startled. "Huh? Oh, I don't know. I thought that we might drop by the Neko-hanten and see if Cologne's come back, then grab something to eat."

"Fine. I'll tell Kasumi not to expect you for lunch. See you later, then."

> Part 4h: SPLISH SPLASH

Kasumi finished hanging up the last of the wash and stepped back. The sight of clean laundry drying in the spring breeze always filled her with mild satisfaction. As she prepared to return to the house, she noticed a small, fluffy black cat perched on the rocks edging the koi pond. It seemed fascinated by something in the water. Even as she watched, the cat leaned over a bit too far and toppled into the pond with a startled squall.

She dropped the laundry basket and rushed over. The cat was paddling with great determination, but was too small to haul itself out of the pond. As for the koi, they were none too happy about the feline intruder. They swum around in angry circles, bumping and nipping at the cat.

"Oh dear!" Kasumi knelt down and fished out the bedraggled little feline. It didn't struggle. The tiny cat merely stared at her with

its big blue eyes and uttered a pathetic mew. The sight was almost indescribably cute.

"You poor thing."

The little feline shivered and sneezed twice.

"I suppose you were hungry. Don't you know that those koi are much too big for you?" Kasumi gently rubbed its tummy and got a surprisingly loud purr. "But I'm afraid that you can't stay here. Poor Ranma, he'll have an absolute fit if he sees you. But you're lucky. I think I'll have enough time to dry you off and give you something good to eat before he returns."

With those words, Kasumi carefully carried the black cat into the Tendo house.

> (end of Part 4) <p>

>

<p>

Author's Notes:

Tentatively scheduled for upcoming sections of Tiger Claw...

Part 5 - Ranma and Akane visit Ukyo and meet Ukyo's rescuer. Naturally, wherever Ranma is, the Black Rose is never far behind. However, things don't turn out quite the way Kodachi hopes. Shampoo drops by and she's actually worried about Mousse. And Nabiki has an unpleasant surprise as one of Ranma's worst rivals shows up in Nerima.

^_-

> CREDITS: <p>

Additional inspiration from:

"The Whisper" by Queensryche
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> FujitaShogakukan;
> REJAR by Dara Joy. <p>

Additional fanfic mentions: ^_^

"Hearts of Ice" by Krista Perry and "Nekophobia" by David Eddy for starting my obsessive interest in the neko-stuff.

Many thanks to my pre-readers, for their suggestions, critiques, and support. ^_^

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> ----- <p>

5. Part 5

> <meta name="generator"> Ranma 1/2 - Tiger Claw (part 5)

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> <p>

TIGER CLAW: A Ranma 1/2 fanfic - by Madamhydra@aol.com
>

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Part 5: DARKENING HEARTS (part I)
>

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<p>

> Disclaimer

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> IMPORTANT NOTE:

This is a CONTINUATION-ALTERNATE REALITY fanfic. While I follow the manga (and video) continuity to just after Mount Phoenix (volume 38), the subsequent wedding ceremony (and the related bombing by Shampoo and Ukyo) does NOT occur. In this story, a different incident involving the planned wedding took place.
> <p>

Only a limited number of the main characters have actually SEEN the Neko-ken (the Tendos, Genma, Shampoo, Cologne, Gosunkugi or Sasuke, and Kuno), although others may have heard rumors about it.

> Text Conventions

() and / / - thoughts
> <p>

- sound fx
> <p>

" " - Chinese
> <p>

Curse forms are denoted by appropriate suffixes (-chan, -neko, -panda, etc.) except for Ryoga (P-chan) and Mousse (Muu-Muu).

> Part 5#:

"Yuki! Your meal's ready! Yuki! Yuki? Here kitty kitty kitty!" A middle-aged housewife scowled and muttered, "Where's that silly cat gone?"

All over Nerima, a lot of other people were asking the very same sort of questions.

A young man wearing a faintly shimmering dragonscale vest, matching arm bracers, and a piece of women's hosiery as a belt stood hidden amid the leafy branches of a tree near the Tendo compound. Although he had a slightly effeminate appearance, he was also quite handsome with his blue-black hair and elegant facial features. At that moment, those elegant features were distorted by an irritated scowl.

Pantyhose Tarou was annoyed.

(Damn you, Happosai, where are you?)

Tarou had just wasted the last few hours prowling around Nerima futilely trying to locate the old lech. Finally, Tarou settled down to keep an eye on the Tendo compound. There was no telling where Happosai might be at any given moment, but he always came back to the Tendos and his 'heir', Ranma Saotome. As he waited for the old pervert's return, he pulled a tattered piece of paper from his pocket and read it again.

"Tarou, my dear boy. After a great deal of thought, I've generously decided to grant your request to change your name. However, there is one small condition. I want you to get a certain document from Ranma. Unfortunately, I don't know where that miserable boy has it hidden. If you can find it and bring it to me within a week, I'll be glad to give you your name of choice. That's all. Cheerio!

"PS: Ranma doesn't know I'm looking for that paper. Try not to slip up, hm?"

He stared down at the note with a skeptical sneer.

('Generously decided'? 'Grant my request'? Who does the old bastard think he's dealing with!? A 'small condition'? If that's a 'small condition', Happosai's a Buddhist monk. And as for trusting Happosai to keep his end of the bargain....)

Tarou snorted. (No way. Not after last time... or the time before that.)

Leaning back against the tree trunk, he frowned thoughtfully. (Ranma's no match for Happosai. If the old pervert wants this paper so badly, why can't he just take it? Not only that, it can't be THAT hard to trick that idiot Ranma into revealing its location. I could think of any number of ways.... What's so special about that document and why does Happosai need it so quickly?)

(Is it some sort of magical item? Perhaps it discloses a special martial arts technique. Hmph! For all I know, it could be a map to something totally useless like his hidden stash of women's underwear. But it doesn't really matter what that paper is. If Happosai wants it so badly, then I want it MORE. And once I get my hands on it, I'll see whether it's worth keeping for myself or not.)

As he wondered what valuable or earth-shattering secrets might be in the mystery document, Tarou started to chuckle evilly.

> Part 5#:

As they left the hospital, Akane noticed that Ranma had a worried look on his face.

"What's wrong?"

He absently said, "I was just wondering how Ukyo's doing after... yesterday."

Akane felt a familiar flare of jealousy. Her first impulse was to snarl something nasty but she managed to throttle it into submission. She took a deep breath and thought, (No. This is just what Nabiki's been warning about. I'm not going to say anything. I'll see how Ranma wants to handle this.)

She looked away and said evenly, "Fine. You do that."

He took a step down the stairs, then glanced back at her. "Akane, you coming?"

She blinked. "You want me to come with you?"

Ranma give her a puzzled look. "Of course. Why wouldn't I want you to come along?" He suddenly appeared worried. "Unless... did something happened between you and Ukyo yesterday? Something I don't know about?"

Akane hesitated a bit. "No. Not really. Ukyo just had a hard time dealing with... everything."

She silently added, (But she was so bitter when I tried to explain about the Neko-ken.... Ukyo acted like I was lying to her!)

Akane shrugged. "I thought you might want to talk to her alone...."

He muttered, "Where would you get a stupid idea like that? It's not like I got anything to hide."

She scowled at him a bit. "Oh really? Are you sure about that?"

He opened his mouth to make an angry retort, but suddenly stopped.

"Despite what you and Nabiki might think, I'm not blind. I know something weird's been going on between you and Ukyo recently."

Ranma's natural impulse was to tell Akane to butt out, but he found himself slowly saying, "Yes, there is." He saw her frown and hastily added, "But it's not what you're thinking!"

Akane flushed and hunched her shoulders. "Just what am I supposed to think? For the last couple of weeks, Ukyo's been really moody and... and whenever you guys meet, you're always watching her." Suddenly, she gave him a furious glare.

"Ranma! You didn't!"

"Huh!?"

"You and... and Ukyo! Don't tell me you two...! She's not... she's not...."

"Not what!?"

"....pregnant....," she mumbled under her breath.

"WHAT?!?!" Ranma looked totally stunned.

She turned away to stare furiously at an inoffensive shrub. Actually, she looked more hurt than angry.

Ranma dropped his face into his hands and muttered, "Oh, just great."

(And just how many other people in Nerima are thinking the same sort of thing?) As he struggled to come up with a story that won't make the whole situation worse, that little inner voice spoke up.

/ Tell her the truth. /

(I suppose I could just tell Akane the truth. But Ukyo....)

/ It wasn't your fault.... /

> <p>

/ It was HER screw-up.... /

> <p>

/ Why should you suffer for her stupidity? /

> <p>

/ She doesn't deserve to be protected.... /

> <p>

/ Let the fool face the consequences. /

Taking a deep breath, Ranma reached out and put his hand on Akane's shoulder. She shrugged it off at first but he firmly but gently pulled her around to face him. He said quietly, "Listen. You've got absolutely no reason to be jealous of Ukyo. She and I are childhood friends. Nothing more. I never touched her, okay? If you really want to know what's going on... I'll tell you. But not now and not here."

Trust and jealousy fought in Akane as she stared up at him and the earnest look on his face.

"Please, Akane. I swear... whatever's going on with Ukyo, it's got nothing to do with THAT."

Trust won... barely. She nodded slowly. "All right. Later."

/ Now say something nice. /

He stepped back and grinned slightly. "And I'd sorta feel better if you came with me, okay?"

Ranma released an inner sigh of relief as Akane rewarded him with a quick flash of a smile.

Kodachi scowled as she swirled the clear liquid around the small flask with a scowl. The extract from the dried Umbra roses was disappointingly weak. However, the scent WAS there, subtle and alluring.

(Perhaps the dried petals of the Umbra rose won't be enough, but at least I'll be able to see whether the information on that ancient scroll has any merit.)

As she finished sprinkling the scented water over her clothes and working it into her hair, Sasuke reappeared in a blur.

"Mistress...."

With a sharp flick of her comb, Kodachi curtly said, "Stand away."

Sasuke knew better than to ask silly questions. He immediately retreated across the room and backed out the window.

"Well?" she snapped.

Peering over the windowsill from the outside, the little ninja said, "Mistress Kodachi, I've located Ranma Saotome. At this very moment, he's headed toward Ukyo Kuonji's restaurant." Sasuke's voice was muffled because he had a cloth clamped over his mouth and nose.

Kodachi's expression turned ugly. With a snarl, she hurled the comb in Sasuke's direction. It zipped past his ear and buried itself into the tree trunk outside her bedroom window.

After she stormed out of the room, Sasuke took a cautious sniff but couldn't smell anything out of the ordinary.

> Part 5#:

Ranma abruptly stopped as soon as he caught sight of Ukyo's restaurant.

"What's wrong?" Akane demanded.

"It's closed."

"What? At this hour?"

He glanced at her and frowned slightly. "Are you SURE she was okay yesterday?"

"Well, I thought so. She wasn't physically hurt or anything like that. She was upset, of course, but I didn't think she was THAT upset."

They exchanged worried looks, then headed straight for the restaurant.

Ranma pounded loudly on the door and waited impatiently for an answer. Just as he was about to kick down the door, it slid open. An unfamiliar young woman stood in the doorway, towel in hand. She cocked her head slightly and said politely, "Hello?"

Ranma sharply asked her, "Who are you? Where's Ukyo?"

"Ukyo? Oh, you mean Ms. Kuonji." The woman's expression became bit cooler. "She's upstairs resting."

"Resting!?"

"Yes. Who are YOU?"

Ranma was about to answer when he caught a glimpse of the

restaurant's demolished interior. He rudely shoved the unknown woman out of the way and forced his way inside.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?" the stranger complained.

After taking a long look at the broken furniture and the conspicuous bloodstains on the floor, Ranma turned to the stranger and angrily demanded, "What the hell's going on here!?"

No one could miss the hostility and suspicion in Ranma's voice. And while he wasn't in an actual fighting stance, he was clearly alert, ready for any unpleasant surprises. The woman cautiously backed up a few steps, then propped one hand on her hip.

"Well, that depends on just who's asking."

Ranma snapped, "We're her friends, damn it! Now tell us what's goin' on!"

The woman hesitated before answering. "An intruder broke in sometime last night and attacked Ms. Kuonji. She got hurt. Like I said before, she's upstairs resting."

"And what are you doing here?"

The woman snorted. "I was passing nearby when I heard the commotion. I saw the fighting. Your friend was losing -- and losing badly -- so I evened up the odds a bit. I managed to drive the ugly bastard off. She had some nasty cuts and a bump on the head. I patched her up and stuck around to make sure she was doing okay. By the way, my name's...."

She didn't have the chance to finish as Ranma dashed upstairs with Akane at his heels. The young woman was left standing alone on the ground floor.

"....Yuri."

She reached behind her and adjusted something tucked in the small of her back, then quietly followed the others upstairs.

> Part 5#:

Ranma burst into Ukyo's bedroom and shouted, "Uc-chan! Are you all ri...."

He skidded to a halt as soon as he realized that Ukyo was naked from the waist up, except for some broad white bandages tightly wound about her lower torso.

"Ranma!?" A horrified Ukyo stared blankly at him, frozen in shock and surprise.

"Oops! Sorry! I didn't mean to...." He immediately tried to backpedal

out of the room but only succeeding in crashing into Akane who was trying to enter at the same time. They both landed in a confused pile on the floor.

"Ranma, get off of me, you idiot! What do you think you're doing, charging into a girl's bedroom like that with no warning!? You should have at least knocked!"

Akane angrily hauled Ranma off the floor and threw him out of the bedroom. After slamming the door in his face, she turned around to see a white-faced Ukyo struggling to sit up. She hastily pushed the chef back down onto the futon.

"Relax! Take it easy," she said as she hastily covered up Ukyo with the sheets.

The door opened a crack, and Ranma nervously asked, "Uh, Uc-chan? You... um... dressed now?"

Akane whirled around and glared in his direction. "Don't be ridiculous! How can she possibly get dressed when she's been hurt like this? Just wait a moment, all right?"

Yuri paused halfway up the stairs. She eavesdropped just long enough to confirm that the two young intruders were actually friends of Ukyo. Shaking her head at the commotion, she headed back downstairs to the kitchen.

With Akane's help, Ukyo managed to get herself decently covered. She was thankful for the delay. She needed the time to regain her composure before facing Ranma.

(He seems so... normal... today. It's like that fight yesterday didn't even happened!)

Akane yelled, "Okay, you can come in now."

Ranma warily stepped into the room. He looked Ukyo over, noticing her pale complexion, the scrapes along her arms, and the telltale signs of pain around her eyes. "How are you feeling?"

Ukyo smiled weakly. "I've had better days. But it could have been worse."

He chuckled a bit, then said, "That girl downstairs..."

"Yuri?"

Ranma shrugged. "I guess so. She said that you were attacked last night by an intruder."

Ukyo stared at her fingers. "Yeah. The... guy broke in late last night. I got careless. Yuri managed to drive... him away."

Scratching the back of his neck, he muttered, "Uh... shouldn't you be in the hospital?"

Ukyo chattered nervously, "Oh, it's not that bad. Really! Just a few minor cuts and bruises. Nothing serious. No point making a big deal about it!"

Standing behind Ranma, Akane frowned. She had seen the look of pain on Ukyo's face when she had tried to move. No matter what she said, Ukyo was hurt a lot worse than she was letting on.

Ranma started to reach out to touch her, but paused. She looked unnervingly fragile. He bit his lip, then said, "Is that... it? Did... anything else... happen?"

Ukyo stared at him blankly, then her eyes widened. "No no no! I just got a bit beat up. That's IT!"

Ranma hesitated but decided not to press the issue. "Did you get a look at the guy?"

The chef mumbled, "It was dark. I couldn't really see much, especially after I knocked my head against the wall."

"You... sure you're all right?"

Ukyo gave him a bright smile. "Don't worry! A little rest and I'll be fine. Actually, I was about to ask the same about you. How are YOU doing?" Ukyo's gaze flicked anxiously between Ranma and Akane.

His lips twitched slightly but it really couldn't be considered a smile. "Same as you. I've had better days."

Actually, Ukyo couldn't quite recall ever seeing Ranma in better physical shape. He was showing absolutely no signs of the injuries he sustained during the fight with Kuno and Ryoga.

(And that doesn't make any sense. This isn't a matter of a few minor cuts and bruises. Kuno and Ryoga really HURT him. Ranma's a fast healer, but even he couldn't have totally recovered overnight... or could he? There's no signs of soreness or pain... and something about the way he was moving....)

Ukyo shook her head and said, "What happened, Ran-chan?"

He looked down at his hands but didn't say anything. Akane said, "During the storm last night, there was a fire at his parents' house. It burned down to the ground."

Ukyo gasped. "Are they...."

"They're hurt, but Dr. Tofu says that they should be fine with some rest."

Ukyo looked away for a second, then reached out to touch Ranma's knee. "I'm so sorry to hear that. I know how much you care about them."

His hands clenched briefly. "In more ways than one, Uc-chan." He glanced quickly at Akane, then added, "They said it was lightning

from the thunderstorm, but I kinda wonder about that."

The chef looked startled. "What... you don't think it was an accident?"

"If the fire was the only thing, I wouldn't have a problem with it. But with the other weird stuff that's happened yesterday, I'm not so sure." Ranma got up and said, "That's why this mysterious intruder bothers me so much. First, that stuff with Kuno and Ryoga... then my parents... and now you. It's all too much of a coincidence."

Ukyo muttered, "When you talk about it like that, I guess it's more than a little suspicious."

He shook his head. "Yeah. Listen, I need to talk to that woman downstairs... what's her name? Yuri? Maybe she's got a better idea what this guy looks like. Be back in a sec, okay?"

When Akane got up to follow Ranma out of the room, Ukyo grabbed Akane's wrist.

"Ukyo?" said Akane in a startled voice.

The chef pulled her closer and asked in a soft, urgent voice, "Did Ranma go anywhere last night?"

"What...?"

"Did he go out at all?"

"No, he didn't."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm pretty sure."

"And how would you know?" Ukyo asked, both suspicion and jealousy creeping into her voice.

"Because... because...." Akane tried to find a less awkward way to say it but finally gave up. With a reluctant sigh, she muttered, "I was in his room most of the night. I can guarantee that he didn't leave the house. I would've heard him."

"You were what!?" Ukyo glared angrily at her.

Akane glared back. "It wasn't anything like THAT! I was just keeping an eye on him, all right?"

Ukyo's anger subsided, then in an odd voice, she said, "You were really worried about him...."

Akane fidgeted uneasily, but something about the obvious disbelief in the chef's voice rubbed her the wrong way. Instead of her usual attempts to deny any interest in Ranma, Akane tossed back her head and said tersely, "Yes, I was really worried." Her fierce gaze dared Ukyo to contradict her.

The chef stared up into Akane's face. Ukyo wasn't exactly sure what to make of her behavior.

(Does she really mean that or is she just feeling... possessive? I wonder....)

Shoving that question aside, Ukyo hurriedly began to crawl out of bed.

(I need to tell Yuri not to say anything about the cat creature to Ranma.)

"Ukyo, lie down! I know that you're hurt a lot worse than you're letting on. And I don't understand why are you trying to hide it from Ranma."

"Akane, help me up now or get out of my way!"

"Sheesh! Oh, all right!"

Downstairs, Ranma headed purposefully toward Yuri. She stopped sweeping the floor and gave him an inquiring look.

Stopping in front of her, he muttered in embarrassment, "Uh... sorry about pushing you around earlier. I'm Ranma Saotome."

Yuri blinked. "Ranma...? You're... Ranma?" She quickly recovered from her surprise and shook her head. "Hey, no problem. You were upset. The place was a bloody wreck and your friend was missing. Perfectly understandable."

"Ukyo said she didn't get a good look at the guy who broke in. How about you? Did you get a better look at him?"

Yuri murmured, "Him? The... guy... who broke in? Uh.... Well, that's not surprising. She did get a pretty hard knock on her head."

Ranma eyed her curiously and asked, "Ukyo looks like she got hurt pretty bad. Why didn't you take her to the hospital?" There was a slightly accusing tone in his voice.

She sighed and shrugged. "I wanted to, but she kept telling me that it wasn't that serious. She REALLY didn't want to go. I was afraid that she'd aggravate her injuries if I tried to force her. I've got some experience patching up people so I decided to fix her up here. Although... I've been having second thoughts about that decision."

"What do you mean?"

"When I checked on her this morning, her memory of last night was somewhat spotty. Her concussion might be more severe than I thought. I'd feel a lot better if you could convince her to go see a real doctor."

"You're not a doctor?"

Yuri laughed. "Hardly. But in my line of work, it's damned useful to know how to patch up injuries as well as inflict them."

"I kinda guessed you were some sort of martial artist. You've got the moves."

She grinned. "You can tell, huh? You too?"

He gave her a cocky grin in return. "Yeah."

Yuri's expression suddenly turned rather grim. "Well, it's lucky that Ukyo's a damn good martial artist herself. She managed to put up quite a fight. Otherwise, she'd probably be dead right now."

Ranma was now looking very somber himself. "And you think it wasn't just a burglar."

"I know it wasn't. Come on, an ordinary thief doesn't stand around and fight, especially with a trained martial artist. An ordinary burglar would have cut and run as soon as she discovered him. No, I think the attacker was going after HER, not her property, if you know what I mean."

"Damn...."

At that moment, someone flung the front door open and a flurry of black rose petals swirled into the restaurant. Ranma flinched and cringed as he heard Kodachi's familiar crazed laughter echoing through the dining room. The dreaded gymnast pounced on him and flung her arms around him. Snuggling up against him, she purred, "Oh, Ranma darling! I've been looking for you all morning!"

Ranma muttered in a strangled voice, "Kodachi! Get off me!" as he tried unsuccessfully to wiggle free from her tenacious grasp.

Kodachi was not about to let her quarry go so easily. She nuzzled Ranma, pulling his head down and burying it into her perfumed hair. Suddenly Kodachi felt Ranma's resistance slacken slightly. She snuck a quick peek into Ranma's face. His eyes were looking just a bit unfocused.

(YES! It IS working!) she thought gleefully.

While Kodachi was clinging to Ranma for all she was worth, Yuri was unhappily eyeing the petals littering the freshly swept floor. Before the gymnast could do anything else, Yuri said in a distinctly irritated voice, "Do you MIND not leaving this junk all over the place?"

Kodachi turned and glared at the young woman standing behind her. The gymnast looked her over, noticed the broom in Yuri's hands, and sneered. "And who are you to interrupt this cherished meeting with my darling Ranma? Menials should know their place."

Yuri flushed angrily. "Just who are you calling a menial, kiddo?"

"How DARE you talk back to me in such a fashion? What were you trying to do, you tawdry little tramp? Flirt with my fiance?"

Operating more by reflex than actual thought, Ranma incoherently mumbled, "But I'm NOT your fiance...." His words was totally ignored

by both young women.

"Tramp!? Hey! I wasn't flirting with anybody! I'm just asking for a little common courtesy here!"

Kodachi snarled, "Courtesy is for equals....," she gave Yuri a contemptuous look, "which you plainly are not. And there's nothing COMMON about the Black Rose!" Even in the midst of her heated argument with Yuri, Kodachi continued to cling to Ranma's arm with the persistence of a starving leech.

After a brief instant of dizziness, Ranma's thinking processes started to clear up... perhaps becoming a bit TOO clear. He shook his head, trying to shake off the cool, icy sensation that seemed to drift through his brain -- a feeling that promised to make his whole life so much easier....

It wasn't working. An uncanny feeling of exhilaration swept through his body... a sense of unspeakable freedom unlike anything he had ever felt before.

Instead of his usual sense of anxiety and nervousness at Kodachi's antics, Ranma began to feel merely... annoyed.

The argument between Kodachi and Yuri was going full blast as Kodachi continued to shriek insults and threats. Yuri apparently had a well-developed streak of temper herself, because she was certainly holding up her end of the shouting match. However, Yuri's anger didn't prevent her from noticing that Ranma's expression of panicked nervousness had changed into a look of cool distaste.

His elbow strike was so fast that Yuri nearly missed it, even though she'd been looking directly at him. One second, Kodachi had been screaming insults... the next second, she was lying in a crumpled heap on the floor. The girl probably never even saw what hit her.

Ranma calmly stared down at the unconscious Kodachi, then his inscrutable gaze moved to Yuri. She blinked, then murmured, "You ARE good."

Yuri wondered what Ranma was going to do next, but never got a chance to find out. At that moment, they both heard Akane's voice from upstairs.

"Be careful, Ukyo. Here, take my arm before you fall down the steps."

Ranma shook his head sharply, then turned to face the stairway. A few seconds later, Ukyo slowly made her way down the stairs, discretely supported by Akane. When the two girls noticed Kodachi sprawled out on the floor, Ukyo muttered, "Good grief, not again."

"Huh?" With a bewildered look on his face, Ranma glanced behind him

and blinked in surprise when he saw Yuri kneeling on the floor beside an unconscious Kodachi. She checked the gymnast's pulse, then looked up at Ranma and the others. Yuri said, "Do you guys usually have to knock her unconscious in order to stop these crazy temper tantrums of hers?"

Ukyo gave her a sour grin. "You've got it. It's about the only thing that'll make her shut up."

Yuri raised an eyebrow. "I see. I'll keep that in mind."

Ranma rubbed his forehead in confusion. After tentatively sniffing the air, he abruptly yanked off his blue shirt, leaving only his white tank-top on. As Yuri discretely admired the sight of Ranma's superb physique, Akane said, "Ranma, what are you doing!?"

Holding his shirt out at arm's length, he said, "I think Kodachi was wearing some... weird perfume... and she's got it all over my shirt. And me." He shook his head again as if to struggling to clear it.

In an instant, Akane had deserted Ukyo and was standing by his side. "Ranma, are you all right!?"

"I'm feeling a bit... not quite... I'm feeling a bit weird."

She yanked the shirt from his hand and sniffed at it before he could stop her.

"Akane!" he yelped in alarm.

She sniffed again to make sure. Except for the clean, masculine smell that she somehow knew was Ranma's, she couldn't detect any other odors.

"Ranma, are you sure? I don't smell anything strange." She handed it to Ukyo who gave it a few cautious sniffs herself.

"She's right. I can't pick up anything unusual."

Before Ukyo could pass Ranma's shirt over to Yuri, he snatched it back and tossed the shirt across the room.

"Are you girls crazy!? Who knows what one of Kodachi's concoctions might do to you guys!" He frowned. "Are you SURE you can't smell anything?"

The girls nodded their heads in agreement.

"Well, I certainly can. Uc-chan, I've got to use your bathroom. That damn stuff's all over me."

"No problem."

As he disappeared into the bathroom, Yuri wandered over to Ranma's discarded shirt. After holding it up to her nose, she said, "Well, I don't smell anything either."

Akane said uncertainly, "Maybe only it only works on guys?"

Yuri shrugged, "It could be."

Ranma soon reappeared, mopping his face and arms dry with a towel. Stopping several yards away, he glanced down at Kodachi and worriedly asked, "Is she okay?"

Yuri said, "She got hit pretty hard, but she's probably only got a minor concussion. I don't think anything else is wrong." She gave Ranma a questioning glance. Since he wasn't sure what she was asking of him, his only response was a shrug and a confused look.

Akane said, "So what do we do with her now? We can't just leave her lying on the floor until she wakes up."

Ukyo muttered, "I guess we do the same thing we did last time."

Ranma said, "What's that?"

The chef shrugged or tried to. "We got Sasuke to cart her back home."

Yuri said, "You know, if she acts like this on a regular basis, she probably needs some serious help."

Akane snorted as Ukyo said fervently, "Don't we know it!"

"Who is she, anyway?"

"Allow us to introduce you to Kodachi Kuno, otherwise known as the Black Rose."

Yuri suddenly straightened up and looked a bit sick. "K-Kuno? Did you say 'Kuno'? Wealthy family? Lives in a huge compound on Kichigai Street?"

"Uh, yes. How did you know where they live...?"

Yuri walked over to the nearest wall and started to bang her head half-heartedly against it as she softly muttered, "Shit, shit, SHIT!"

Ranma, Akane, and Ukyo stared at each other in utter confusion.

> Part 5#:

After Yuri managed to regain her composure, she collapsed into a chair and was now looking seriously depressed.

"Great. Just bloody great! Why me...?" she moaned.

"What's with you and the Kunos?" Ranma asked.

With a weary sigh, Yuri said, "One of my main reasons for coming to Nerima was to talk to the Kunos and request their assistance. And now

I've managed to get into a screaming fight with the daughter of the house -- a fight that ends up with her getting bashed unconscious! Well, I can see that my chances of getting any help from them has just become a big fat zero...."

Ukyo muttered, "You might be surprised."

Akane said, "You're asking the Kunos for help?" She and Ranma exchanged dubious looks before he asked, "What kind of help?"

Yuri rubbed her neck uneasily and said, "Ummm, that's sort of... private family business. All I can say is that I've got to ask them for a really BIG favor."

Ranma stared at the ceiling. "Oh man...."

Ukyo said, "Yuri, do you know ANYTHING about the Kunos?"

"Just some general information. I think the current head of the family is the principal at a place called Furinkan High School. He has two children, a son and a daughter. I was planning on doing a bit more research once I arrived in town, but I got a little sidetracked." She glanced at Ukyo.

The chef said, "Let's call the Kuno estate and have someone haul Kodachi away. Then we'll give you some idea just what you're getting yourself into."

Yuri looked distinctly uneasy. "That bad, huh?"

The others nodded vigorously.

"Oh god. This is getting better and better."

"Welcome to Nerima, honey," said Ukyo as she gave Yuri a consoling pat on the shoulder.

Sasuke hadn't been available, but Ukyo managed to browbeat one of the other servants into picking Kodachi up. Thirty minutes later, Yuri and Akane managed to stuff Kodachi in a taxi with an anxious, middle-aged housemaid. During this entire operation, Ranma merely watched and maintained a wary distance.

While they had been waiting for the taxi, he and the two girls had enlightened Yuri about the Kuno family's 'charming' eccentricities. After listening to their stories, Yuri looked as if she had been slammed over the head with a wooden post.

"Unbelievable...." Her voice failed her. She gave them a frantic look. "Please tell me that this is all a really bad joke."

"I wish I could," Akane said.

"Let me get this right. The elder Kuno is some whacked out school dictator who runs around with hair clippers and has delusions of being a Hawaiian surfer dude. The daughter is a neurotic obsessive harridan who lies, cheats, and uses drugs at the drop of a hat. And the son thinks he's some noble samurai warrior, spouts really bad

poetry, and has this thing against WATERMELONS!?"

Yuri plopped her head face down on the table and muttered, "I'm doomed."

> Part 5#:

Ukyo's stomach growled loudly. As everyone stared at her, she blushed slightly and muttered, "I missed lunch and dinner yesterday."

Akane leaned forward eagerly and said, "Don't move! I'll fix some food for everyone."

Ukyo's expression froze. "Uh... uh...."

Ranma blurted out, "Akane! Ukyo's sick enough as it is! You can't...."

His voice trailed off as Akane turned and glared at him.

"What... did... you... SAY?"

Yuri could have sworn that she saw a faint reddish glow around Akane.

"I... I mean... that is..., " he sputtered.

Ukyo was astonished by Akane's restraint. The youngest Tendo daughter should have slammed Ranma with the closest heavy object by now.

Yuri, no fool, politely interrupted. "There's no need to take the trouble. I've already cooked up some rice and soup for Ukyo. If you guys are hungry, there's plenty to spare."

Ranma sniffed and said, "Wow, it smells great!"

Yuri blinked to see the naked relief on Ranma's and Ukyo's faces. She smiled faintly, then murmured, "Ukyo, while I was cooking, I ran out of pepper. Can you show me where you have some more?" Although her tone was perfectly casual, she gave Ukyo a meaningful glance.

The chef said, "Uh, sure. Come back to the storage room." The two young women disappeared into the kitchen.

Akane tapped her foot anxiously on the floor, then headed off after them.

"Akane."

She turned around and stared at him angrily. In a hostile tone, she growled, "What?"

Ranma looked away uncomfortably and said, "I'm... sorry. It's just that.... I mean, it's... it's the thought that counts. Really."

She smiled uncertainly at him before disappearing into the kitchen.

In the storeroom, Yuri said, "You didn't tell him about the monster."

"I... I didn't want to make him worry."

Yuri frowned. "He doesn't seem the type to be easily rattled by this sort of thing."

"I'm sorry. I can't explain at the moment. It's... sort of personal. But as a favor to me, would you please avoid telling him about the cat creature?"

Yuri sighed uncomfortably and said, "This is against my better judgment but.... all right. But tell me, do you want me to simply avoid telling him or should I lie about it when he asks me for details... because I'm pretty sure that he eventually will. He seems pretty concerned about the attack."

"If you could just... talk around it. For now? I'll try to explain this to you at a later date but...." Ukyo made a helpless gesture.

Yuri flung up her hands. "Okay, okay! But I really think you should consider telling him about the cat monster...."

At that moment, Akane opened the door. She turned pale and said, "WHAT cat monst...."

Ukyo hauled Akane roughly into the storeroom, gasping in pain at the sudden physical effort. She quickly peeked out into the dining room. Ranma was sitting on the stool with his back to the cooking area. He turned around to see Ukyo anxiously watching at him.

"Uc-chan? You need some help back there?"

"No, no! I just misplaced it. Be out there in a moment!"

Ukyo popped back into the storeroom, slid the door shut, and sighed in relief. "He didn't hear you, Akane."

Akane's stomach started to churn uneasily. "What's this about a cat monster?"

Ukyo's gaze flitted over to Yuri, then she took a deep breath before saying, "Akane, the intruder that broke in... wasn't human."

"No!"

"Shhhhh!"

"But...."

"Yuri, could you get Ranma something to eat? I've some private stuff to discuss with Akane."

Yuri looked at the two girls and said, "Sure."

"Thanks a lot. I really appreciate it."

"No problem."

When Yuri left, Akane asked, "Okay, Ukyo. Start talking."

Ukyo briefly told Akane what happened the previous night. She finished by describing the monster. "It looked like a cat but it was walking upright on two legs. It had longish black fur, a weird smell.... and glowing green eyes."

Akane sank down on a bag of flour, almost too stunned to think. Suddenly, she started to put things together. She looked outraged as she said, "You asked me about Ranma being out of the house last night. Don't tell me you think... that it was RANMA!?"

"I... I don't know WHAT to think!"

"But Ukyo, come on! What POSSIBLE reason would Ranma have for wanting to hurt you?"

Ukyo flinched visibly at the question. "I... I...."

"Ukyo, what....? You're not telling that there IS a reason!?" Akane started to lose her temper. She grabbed Ukyo's shirt and pulled her close. "Did you do something to him? Is that why the two of you have been acting so edgy with each other for the last week or so?"

Between her guilty conscience and Akane's possessive attitude, Ukyo was getting more than a little angry herself. "How come you're blaming me? Why do you assume that it's MY fault? Hasn't it occurred to you that maybe it's something that Ranma did to ME?" she yelled back.

Akane turned white with fury. "You're lying! What could he possibly have done to you? He may be an obnoxious jerk at times, but he'd never do anything to deliberately hurt you. If you want to accuse him of something, stop hinting and just SAY IT!"

Ukyo opened her mouth, then slowly closed it. She pulled away from Akane and buried her face in her hands. (What's wrong with me? What am I thinking of? I was ready to smear Ranma's reputation just to get back at Akane....)

The chef exhaled slowly. "Just... just forget it. Ranma didn't do anything to me. I was just... shooting off my mouth."

Akane glared at her, then her hostile expression eased slightly. "Don't say something that you'll regret. Don't hurt him. He has too much to worry about right now."

Ukyo glared furiously at the youngest Tendo. "That's a fine thing, coming from you! Aren't you the one who's always blaming him for everything without listening to his side? Aren't you the one who's always insulting him... calling him all sorts of names? Aren't you the one who keeps saying that you hate him?"

Akane flinched slightly. Staring down at the floor, she looked both sad and thoughtful. "Yes, I... was." She shook herself, then changed the subject. "Ukyo, when did the attack occur?"

"About 3 AM."

Akane released a subdued sigh of relief. "Then it couldn't possibly have been Ranma. I was watching him. He didn't so much as twitch in his sleep."

Ukyo eyed the other girl dubiously. Akane certainly sounded sincere, but the chef knew that she personally would have lied herself blue in the face if she thought it was necessary to protect Ranma.

The chef whispered, "But if it wasn't Ranma... that means.... Those glowing green eyes...."

Akane said, "Come on, Ukyo. I think you should tell Ranma what really happened here last night. We told you about the fire at his parents' house. If someone -- or something -- is going around attacking his friends and family, he needs to know."

Just before they exited the storeroom, Akane grabbed Ukyo's wrist. "And whatever you do, don't let Ranma know that you EVER suspected him of attacking you. That's the last thing he needs. He's already having enough problems trying to deal with the Neko-ken and what he did to Kuno and Ryoga."

Ukyo flinched at the very mention of the Cat-Fist.

While Ukyo and Akane were in the storage room, Ranma was happily working on Yuri's cooking. Between bites, he mumbled, "So... what style do you use?"

Yuri said, "Hm? Oh, you mean what martial arts style?"

Ranma nodded, his mouth full.

"Actually, it's a bit of a hodgepodge. A bit of this, a bit of that. With my line of work, I'm more concerned with efficiency rather than purity of style. I use whatever works."

"I kinda do the same thing." Sipping his tea, Ranma said, "Uh... by the way... just what is your line of work?"

Yuri shrugged. "Oh, I do a bit of everything. I investigate. I research. I'm basically a troubleshooter of sorts."

Before Ranma could ask any more questions, Ukyo and Akane stepped out of the storeroom. Both girls looked tense and unhappy.

When they walked into the dining area, Ukyo felt a faint pang of resentment when she noticed that Ranma's anxious gaze focusing on

Akane first and foremost. The look he gave HER was almost an afterthought.

Akane said, "Ranma, Ukyo has something to tell you."

He froze in mid-bite and went pale with apprehension.

The youngest Tendo wondered, (Now what? Why is he looking so anxious all of a sudden?)

Ukyo took a deep breath. "Ran-chan...."

"...Yeah?"

"That intruder that broke in... wasn't human."

Ranma stared blankly at her for a long moment, then the strangest combination of disappointment, confusion, and shock appeared on his face.

"Whaddya mean, it wasn't human!?"

Ukyo twiddled her fingers. "It was some sort of half man and half... cat."

Ranma yelled, "Why the hell didn't you mention that right away!?"

"Because I didn't want you to get all upset! I know how you feel about cats!" Ukyo shouted back.

"It's too late to worry about that now! It was probably too late when Kuno and Ryoga decided to show up on my doorstep yesterday and came damn close to killing me, Akane, and everyone else!"

Ukyo stiffened and said pointedly, "I was there, REMEMBER?"

Ranma said irritably, "How could I possibly forget Shampoo, you, Kodachi, AND my mom all popping up at the same time with those stupid messages!? And while I haven't done a great job handling this whole fiancée thing with you girls, I've certainly learned by now not to ask all of you to a meeting without warning each of you guys that the others were coming! Besides, I know what usually happens when you girls get together! Just how stupid do you think I am!?"

Both Akane and Ukyo took a startled step back in the face of Ranma's unexpected outburst. Yuri busied herself in the kitchen, but she couldn't help overhearing the entire conversation.

Seeing their reaction, Ranma managed to shut himself up before he really got carried away. (What the hell's the matter with me?) As usual, the thought of his romantic entanglements left Ranma feeling impatient and annoyed. Most of the time he managed to keep those emotions under wraps because he didn't want to hurt the girls' feelings. However, this time, he found he was really tired of trying to be nice to them.

/ Why bother? /

A wide-eyed Akane whispered, "Ranma...?"

(Man, I've got to get a grip on myself....) He momentarily closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths before speaking again.

"Listen, Ukyo, I didn't mean to yell at you, okay? But, c'mon! It doesn't take a genius to figure out that the cat-creature that attacked you probably has something to do with what happened with Kuno and Ryoga yesterday." He sighed heavily. "I just wish you'd been honest with me from the very beginning, Ukyo."

The chef flinched slightly and looked away, unable to meet Ranma's eyes. He abruptly turned and walked a few steps away in an effort to calm down. Several awkward moments of silence followed, until Ukyo finally said, "Uh, how are the guys doing?"

Since Ranma didn't look like he was going to say anything, Akane answered, "We just came from the hospital. They were in pretty bad shape when they arrived in the emergency room. Besides the physical injuries, there were... other problems. You remember that Kasumi mentioned that something was wrong with their chi?"

"Yeah. Something about their chi being all screwed up."

"Well, she was right. It took Dr. Tofu all night to get both of them stabilized. Ryoga's in a lot of pain but Dr. Tofu thinks that he'll recover completely. They don't think there was any permanent damage to his eye."

Ranma's shoulders twitched. Akane gave him a worried look and whispered to the chef, "And there shouldn't be any serious scarring."

Ukyo stared at her and said in amazement, "Dr. Tofu calls that a complete recovery!?"

"Considering the alternatives... yes."

"But... but... I mean, Ryoga's been badly hurt before but there was never any talk about permanent injuries and scars!"

Akane made a frantic hushing gesture, but it was too late. Without turning around, Ranma said softly, "Ryoga's never come up against the Neko-ken before." He lifted his right hand and stared thoughtfully at it. "Especially someone using it with a serious intent to kill." Fortunately, he was too busy with his own thoughts to notice the increasingly uneasy looks Ukyo was giving him. However, Akane did notice. She gave the chef a warning glare.

Ukyo took the hint and switched topics. "What about Kuno?"

"Physically, he's in pretty good shape, I think."

"Physically?"

With his back still turned toward the others, Ranma quietly replied, "He's in the psychiatric ward for observation."

"Why?"

Akane said, "Because he was been raving about Ranma and evil monsters...." She shrugged helplessly.

"But isn't he usually doing that?"

"Yes, but Dr. Tofu thinks that it's much more serious this time around. Before, he was just an nuisance. Dr. Tofu considers him to be a real danger to himself and others."

"Oh, I see." But Ukyo immediately recalled her own thoughts from the night before.

(Is it possible? Could it be that moron Kuno's actually onto something?)

> Part 5#:

The door to Uc-chan's slammed open for the second time that afternoon.

"Ranma!"

They all turned to see Shampoo run into the restaurant. Ranma automatically braced himself for the usual rib-crushing glomp. However, the Amazon merely skidded to a stop a few feet away and looked him over thoroughly. She was out of breath and looked almost frantic.

"Ranma, you okay?"

"Y-yeah, Shampoo."

"You see Mousse today?"

"Wha...? Huh?" He looked badly confused by her sudden switch in topics.

"No, we haven't," said Akane.

Shampoo waved her hand at all the broken furniture in Ukyo's restaurant. "Then Mousse not do this?"

"Nope," said Ranma.

The Amazon girl started to yank on her hair while muttering, "Aiyah! Stupid pain in butt Mousse!"

"What's wrong? What did he do?"

"Mousse gone from Neko-hanten. Shampoo hope she find him with Ranma." She uttered a depressed sigh.

"Huh?" Now it was Akane's turn to look totally confused.

"You WANTED him to come after Ranma?" Ukyo sounded outraged.

The Amazon gave the other two girls an irritated look. "Yes. Lesser of two evil. If Mousse not go after Ranma, only other target is...." Her voice trailed off unhappily.

Ranma slid off his stool and quickly grabbed Shampoo by the shoulders. "What's wrong!?"

She reached up and grabbed Ranma's hand. "Be careful! Renegade Amazon now in Nerima!"

"A renegade Amazon!? Oh great!"

She nodded sharply. "Dan Xin is Shampoo's cousin. She is VERY good fighter." Her lips thinned and she reluctantly added, "Better than Shampoo. Dan Xin once great grandmother's prize student. She suppose to be Cologne's successor. You understand?"

Ranma nodded very slowly. "Yeah. I get it."

The Amazon girl rattled off a quick description of Dan Xin. She finished by saying, "You ask about great grandmother? Cologne not around because she too busy chasing Dan Xin. Shampoo got no idea when she return." Frustration was evident in her voice.

Ukyo muttered, "How the hell did Cologne's chosen successor become a renegade?"

Shampoo stared at them grimly. "Dan Xin cause death of own mother and more than fifteen other tribe members."

"Then why is she still alive!?" Akane asked in amazement.

Shampoo looked as if she could barely keep herself from spitting on the floor. "No real proof. She defeat tribe's champion in trial-by-combat so by Amazon law, Dan Xin 'innocent' of crimes. Tribe's champion was Mousse's mother."

Ranma said, "Whoa. I'm starting to get the picture."

"So you think he's gone after Dan Xin?" Akane asked.

"I not know! No have time to talk right now. Shampoo must find and stop Mousse."

Ukyo said in wondering tones, "Shampoo, you really sound like you're worried about him. After the way you've been treating him, I'd have thought.... Why do you want to stop him? I mean...."

The Amazon glared furiously at Ukyo. "Shampoo not leave mad dog in Dan Xin's mercy, much less member of tribe!" She added in a low mutter, "Even if only stupid duck-boy!"

Ranma said, "Then we'd better help you look for him." He looked at Yuri. "Could you hang around with Ukyo while we're gone? Just in case someone... something else shows up here?"

"Listen, Ranma! I do NOT need a baby-sitter...!" the chef protested loudly.

Ranma glared at Ukyo. "You're hurt a lot worse than you're letting on. I could prove it by poking you in the ribs, but I suspect that would REALLY hurt."

The chef bit her lip and flushed with embarrassment.

Yuri nodded briskly. "Sure thing. Besides, I can't leave Nerima until I finish my business with the Kunos."

Akane muttered, "Good luck with that. You'll need it."

Shampoo finally managed to get a word in edgewise. "If Mousse not cause damage, what happen here?"

Ranma glanced at the chef. "Ukyo was just telling us what really happened, right?"

Ukyo turned even redder. "Okay! Last night something broke in here. I heard someone shoving the furniture around, so I ran downstairs to stop them. The next thing I know, this creature pops out of the shadows and slams me into the wall."

"Creature!?"

"Yes. It looked like a big cat but it walked upright like a human."

"Aiyah!" Shampoo gave the pig-tailed young man a worried look as he swore under his breath.

"Well, the creature was about to finish me off when Yuri showed up and drove it off. Shampoo, meet Yuri."

The introduced woman gave Shampoo an interested look and said, "A Chinese Amazon, here in Japan?"

"Yes. You know Amazons?"

"Well, actually, I have encountered some before...."

In the meantime, Ranma said, "Ukyo, you should've been more careful. Why didn't you...?"

The chef turned on him and said, "Hey! This is my property and my livelihood, Ranma! If you think I'm going to let anybody wreck this place while I just sit by and wait for the police to come, you've got another thing coming! Besides, how the hell was I supposed to know that it wasn't a normal burglar!? Like you would have done anything different?"

"But you're just a...."

Yuri coughed loudly and said, "Um, maybe you guys should going to look for... what's his name... Mousse first... before he runs into this Dan Xin person."

"Oh man, that's right."

He turned to leave when Akane said, "Ranma, don't forget your shirt." She picked up it and held the blue shirt out to him.

He eyed it uneasily. "I'm not wearing it! It's still got Kodachi's weird perfume all over it!"

"Kodachi here too?"

Ukyo gestured at the floor. "How else do you think all those stupid rose petals got here? Anyway, we managed to get rid of her. Shipped her home in a taxi, but not before she apparently left Ranma a perfumed souvenir." She gestured at his shirt.

Shampoo snatched the shirt from Akane's hand and sniffed. "Shampoo smell nothing strange."

"That's what I told him. None of us smelled anything wrong with it."

Ranma flung his hands into the air and yelled, "I'm not imagining it, okay?"

"Well, if crazy girl involved, better safe than sorry," said Shampoo as she dumped the shirt on a table.

He shrugged and headed for the door. "Besides, what's wrong with wearing a tee-shirt, anyway?"

All four young women in the restaurant couldn't help but appreciate the sight. Ranma's tanktop provided an excellent view of his arms and broad shoulders while offering tantalizing glimpses of his sleekly muscled back and chest.

Yuri grinned as Shampoo sighed wistfully.

Ukyo rolled her eyes. "Gee, how clueless can you get?"

Akane muttered, "At least he's wearing SOMETHING on top. I just hope he doesn't run into some cold water while he's dressed like that."

"What did you say, Akane?" Ukyo glanced in the other girl's direction.

"It's nothing."

> Part 5#:

In the street outside the restaurant, Ranma said, "Shampoo, why don't we meet up in the Neko-hanten in a hour?"

"Okay."

As she watched the Amazon leave, Akane mused, (Nabiki seems to be right... as usual. It looks like Shampoo's really given up on Ranma. I could get to like that.)

Ranma prepared to go north as Shampoo went in a southerly direction. Akane made a move to head off on her own but he quickly quashed the idea.

"No way, Akane!"

She put her hands on her hips and glared at him. "We can cover more ground if we all split up!"

He said, "I don't want you running off on your own, not with some crazy Amazon on the loose."

"You think I can't handle myself? I've learned a lot over the last couple of months! You should know that."

Ranma sighed. Running his hand through his hair, he said, "I know you've been practicing hard, Akane. I know how much you've improved, even if I haven't said so."

She blinked at the unexpected compliment.

"But you still aren't up to Shampoo's level. And you heard what she said. This woman must be really good, especially if the old ghoul chose Dan Xin as her successor."

He stepped a little closer to Akane. "You can complain all you want, but I won't take a chance of you running into this killer Amazon character by yourself. Got it?"

Akane saw the utter determination on Ranma's face. She couldn't decide whether to feel flattered or exasperated by his concern. Actually, she felt a little of both. In a sulky voice, she said, "Fine, if you want to be that way about it. Come on, let's go."

After doggedly searching from the rooftops of Nerima for over thirty minutes, Akane stopped to catch her breath. To her disgust, Ranma didn't even look like he had broken a sweat. She muttered, "You realize that Mousse could be just about anywhere!"

"I know. But we've got to keep looking. If this Dan Xin person is as bad as Shampoo says...."

"It's hard to imagine someone who could upset Shampoo so badly."

"Well, there's probably a lot more to the story than she's telling us...." Suddenly, Ranma grabbed Akane by the waist and effortlessly hoisted her into his arms as he lashed out with his left foot.

She yelped, "What are you doing...!?" Her outrage quickly faded as she saw Happosai, his face plastered to the bottom of Ranma's shoe.

The old man mumbled, "Why did you do that?" before toppling to the ground, momentarily stunned.

"Keep your hands off Akane, you old pervert!" The unexpected

vehemence in Ranma's voice startled Akane even more.

"But I just wanted to say hello to my little Akane-channnnnnnn...!!!" Happosai's voice faded as Ranma casually booted the old man off into the distance.

As they watched Happosai fade to a little speck, Akane said, "Uh, Ranma?"

"What?"

"Are you planning to hold me like this all day or are you going to put me down?" she said in an irritable voice.

Ranma suddenly realized that that he didn't mind the idea of holding Akane. Not at all. He enjoyed the warmth of her body in his arms... wanted to hold her closer and bury his face in her silky hair... Feeling oddly shaken by that realization, he hastily set her back on her feet and murmured, "Oh... sorry."

Straightening her dress, Akane grumbled, "I could've handled the old lech by myself!"

He shrugged carelessly. "I'm sure you could. But you shouldn't have to." He turned away and easily jumped the gap to the roof next door.

Akane blinked in surprise. (What did he mean by THAT?)

"C'mon, Akane!"

> Part 5#:

After the others departed Ukyo's restaurant, Yuri started picking up the used dishes. "So that's Ranma. He seems to be quite an interesting character."

"You have NO idea. The stories I could tell you...." A suspicious look instantly appeared on Ukyo's face. "Don't tell me you're falling in love with him!"

Yuri snorted in obvious scorn. "Hardly! I barely know the guy. Besides, I've already met the love of my life."

"Really? Does he mind your line of work? After all, dealing with the occult is an unusual career, especially for a woman."

Yuri calmly replied, "He doesn't mind at all. He's dead."

Ukyo was shocked by her casual tone. "Oh. I'm sorry. Wha... what happened?" The last question came out before she could stop herself.

With a shrug, Yuri said, "Do you remember what happened to my clan and how I said their past actions finally caught up with them?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. As for the one who was responsible for his death... I'm working on that."

As Yuri cleaned up the kitchen, Ukyo carefully sat down on a stool and said, "If you don't mind me asking, this 'private' stuff with the Kunos... does it have anything to do with your family's... uh, traditional business?"

Yuri didn't answer immediately, then she slowly said, "Yes, it does. That and certain matters of honor." She put down the towel in her hand. "Ukyo, seriously.... Are the Kunos as really as hopeless as you guys are making out?"

The chef couldn't miss the somber look on Yuri's face. "I wish I could tell you that it's all a big joke, but it's not. You saw Kodachi for yourself. The Principal is a total nutcase. The only one in the family who has any concept of honor is Tatewaki Kuno."

"The only son, right?"

"Yeah. The samurai wanna-be. The one who's now locked up in the hospital's psychiatric ward for observation."

"Damn."

A few minutes later, Yuri said, "What exactly happened to Tatewaki Kuno, anyway? Ranma mentioned something about the Neko-ken...? You asked me about the very same thing this morning."

Ukyo stared down at her hands. "Well, basically, both Kuno and Ryoga have really bad grudges against Ranma because he's supposedly engaged to Akane. Yesterday, the two of them showed up at the Tendos' home and challenged him over some stupid rumors involving Akane and some secret wedding. The fight... well, it turned really ugly. Ranma was forced to use this... extremely vicious fighting style called the Neko-ken."

"It seems pretty obvious that Ranma won, but I must say that he didn't seem at all happy about the victory."

"He's not. He didn't mean to hurt them so badly, but he... well, he wasn't quite himself during the fight."

"Oh." Yuri sighed quietly. "Got carried away in the heat of the moment, hm?"

"You... could say that." Ukyo shifted uneasily on the stool, but her ribs could have been bothering her.

The other woman shrugged. "It happens, you know... especially when your life's on the line or when you're fighting for the person you love."

Ukyo's response was automatic. "He doesn't lov...."

As the chef's voice trailed off, Yuri politely ignored the aborted outburst and said, "You said that he's supposedly engaged to Akane?"

"Well, technically he IS engaged to Akane...." Ukyo glanced up angrily at Yuri. "But he's engaged to me too!"

"How on earth did he end up with two fiancées?"

"Actually, I suppose you could say that he has three."

Yuri raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

Ukyo took a deep breath. "Akane's engaged to Ranma because his idiot father made a promise with her father before their kids were born. When Ranma and I were about five years old, Mr. Saotome talked my dad into an engagement between his son and me... then the scumbag ran off with my dowry while he left me behind! And just after Ranma arrived in Nerima, he managed to beat Shampoo in some stupid fight so she now claims that under some weird Amazon law, Ranma's supposed to be HER husband."

"And about Ms. Kuno?"

"Oh, there's no engagement there. She's just obsessed with him."

Yuri stared at the chef. "Excuse me. Just how long has this multiple engagement thing been going on?"

"Close to two years."

"And nothing's been resolved? Why?" Yuri sounded amazed.

"Oh, I don't know. It's been impossible to get a straight answer out of Ranma."

"He doesn't seem to be the indecisive type."

"He usually isn't. I guess he doesn't want to hurt people's feelings."

Yuri muttered, "Typical male, scared of commitment. What a mess! But I suppose you girls are glad that the matter's finally settled."

"What?" Ukyo looked startled.

"I mean, since Ranma and Akane now seem to be a couple...."

Yuri jumped as Ukyo slammed her hand against the counter. The impact jarred the chef's ribs and made her grimace in pain. As soon as she caught her breath, Ukyo snapped, "NO! Ranma hasn't made his decision yet. Ranma and his father just happen to be living with the Tendos. That's ALL."

Yuri gave the chef a bewildered look. "You WANT to marry him?"

Ukyo said, "Why do you look so surprised?"

"It's just that... well, every time I've seen you with him, you act a bit... nervous."

Ukyo sputtered in outrage, then finally hung her head. "You don't understand. This isn't how things normally are around here. There's a lot more to this whole mess than what I've told you."

Yuri said quietly, "That wasn't too hard to figure out." She shook her head ruefully. "But it's really not my business, except that part dealing with Tatewaki Kuno."

"Yeah, but... but that's just it! Listen, I told you the fight got ugly, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, what really happened was that Kuno and Ryoga both turned into these absolutely HUGE tigers...."

Yuri stiffened and slowly put the pot she was cleaning down in the sink. "Excuse me. Did you say 'tiger'? Are you telling me that they shapeshifted into TIGERS?"

Ukyo nodded. "Uh huh. With glowing green eyes."

Yuri stared silently at the wall for a long moment, then suddenly slammed her fist down on the counter. "Damn it!"

"Yuri!?"

The young woman took a deep breath, then said tersely, "Ukyo, which hospital is Kuno in, right now?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"It's really important, okay?"

"He's at Nerima Central Hospital. What's going on?"

Yuri turned around and said, "Ukyo, I think that it would be best if I found somewhere else to stay."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Sorry. I don't think you should get involved...."

"Hey! I was there when Kuno and Ryoga did their little transformation act. And don't forget, I nearly got killed last night, so don't try to tell me that I'm not involved in whatever's going on! I'm involved all right... right up to my neck!"

Yuri sighed. "I suppose you're right. Ukyo, I haven't really been honest with you about my purpose here in Nerima."

"What do you mean?"

"It wasn't just dumb luck that I was in the right place and time to save you from that cat creature. People in my clan have certain

'talents', you might say. I sensed something unnatural on the prowl last night. I wasn't sure exactly what it was, so I decided to track down the source. I ended up near your restaurant."

Ukyo was quiet, then said, "I sort of guessed that might be the case. I've told you that a lot of weird things happen around Nerima. But what does all this have to do with Kuno?"

Yuri grabbed a stool and sat down. "It's a complicated story. About three centuries ago, the eldest daughter of the Funada clan married the heir of another prestigious clan. As part of her dowry, she took a katana with her, one of a pair of swords which had been in the Funada clan for well over 500 years."

"You don't mean to tell me that...."

Yuri nodded. "Tatewaki Kuno, his sister Kodachi, and their father all carry the Funada bloodline, just like I do. I came to Nerima to ask the Kunos -- or beg them, if necessary -- for help. Three centuries ago, as part of the original marriage agreement, the Kuno clan swore a blood oath to support the Funada clan in the pursuit of their sacred duty to hunt down and destroy supernatural evil. Even though the Kunos and the Funadas have long since gone their separate ways, the Kuno clan is honorbound to agree to my rightful request for their aid."

Yuri hopped off the stool and began to pace anxiously. "But when I got here, I found out from you guys that the entire Kuno family is basically nuts! You said it yourself. The only one in the present family who might have any concept of honor... the only one who might consider standing by his family's ancient obligations is Tatewaki Kuno. And he's currently locked up in a mental ward!"

Yuri seated herself again before continuing her story. "The sword in the Kunos' possession is called 'Inazuma' or 'Lightning', whichever you prefer. Like I said, it's one of a matched pair. The other one was called 'Ame' or 'Rain'. These two swords had special powers which were tremendously useful in carrying out the Funada clan's duty. I NEED those swords."

Ukyo took a deep breath. "Since you're still carrying on your family's 'business', that means that you chasing after something big. Am I right?"

"You've got it. I'm hunting for a very powerful demon."

"Was this demon the one responsible for the destruction of your family?"

"Not directly responsible, but it was certainly involved in a big way. I've been tracking the beast for nearly twelve years. After the destruction of my clan, it apparently vanished. I'm not sure why, but I believe something forced the demon into hiding... probably into a human host. It could be that my grandfather or someone else in the clan managed to cast some sort of binding on the demon or wound it severely with a final strike before dying. I don't know." Yuri shrugged.

"A few years ago, I finally managed pick up its trail. I've been following it ever since... and let me tell you, that's been no easy

task! The traces are so faint, I've had to backtrack constantly. Furthermore, there seemed to be no real rhyme or reason for its travels. Not only did it meander all over Japan, the trail constantly went overseas. Only recently, I ended in China. While I was there, I passed through an Amazon village called Joketsuzoku or something like that. Those Amazons struck me as a very clannish sort, not the type to travel far from their home. That was why I was so surprised to find out your friend Shampoo was a Chinese Amazon."

In a strange voice, Ukyo asked, "This village... was it located near some weird springs?"

Yuri looked astonished. "Yes. How on earth did you know?"

Ukyo wordlessly took a cup of cold water and poured it over Yuri's head.

"Uh, what did you do that for?" said Yuri in a very polite voice.

The chef looked confused. "You didn't get cursed!"

"Oh, you mean at Jusenkyo?" Yuri chuckled. "What sort of reckless fool would wander into such a dangerous area, especially with all those warning signs they've got plastered all over the place?"

Ukyo muttered, "What good are those signs if you don't read Chinese?"

With a confused look on her face, Yuri said, "But some of those signs are in Japanese... and English... and half a dozen other languages! And even if you can't read, any person with sense would stay away from an area marked with all those skull-and-crossbones signs. You'd have to be totally blind to miss those."

"You're kidding me!"

"No." Yuri frowned thoughtfully. "Although, now that you mention it, a lot of those signs looked very new. They couldn't have been more than a year or so old."

"...." Ukyo buried her face in her hands.

Yuri gave Ukyo a faintly suspicious stare. "Excuse me for asking, but how do you know so much about Jusenkyo? It's not exactly the vacation spot of the world. You wouldn't be talking from first-hand experience, would you?"

Thinking of all the Jusenkyo-cursed people lurking around Nerima, the chef barely managed to conceal a wince before hastily protesting, "No! Not me! I've heard about Jusenkyo, but I've never been there! I can prove it!"

Yuri just as hastily said, "No need to do that! Besides, you'll get your bandages wet." She paused a moment to regroup her thoughts before continuing with her story. "Anyway, I followed the demon's trail from China back to Japan. Unfortunately, I lost the trail around Tokyo. Since I was in the area, I decided to go to Nerima and speak to the Kunos."

"Is that why you want to talk to Kuno then? Are you hoping that he'll be able to tell you where the sword Inazuma is?"

Yuri muttered, "It's a lot more complicated than that! I need the sword AND I need Kuno!"

"Excuse me!?"

"The swords' powers are gender-specific. Inazuma's special powers only works for men, Ame's powers only works for women. Get the picture? I'm female, so Inazuma would be just another katana in my hands."

"Oh, great! A male chauvinist sword. But why do you need Kuno? Can't you find another guy...?"

Yuri sighed, "Inazuma and Ame are dedicated first and foremost to the service of the Funada family."

"Oh... I guess that means you need to have be a member of the Funada clan to use the swords, right?"

"Yes. That pretty much limits the candidates to people with Funada blood, but in some rare instances, spouses can qualify, too. With the destruction of the main Funada clan, I don't know of any other men with the proper bloodline except for Tatewaki Kuno and his father. And frankly, I'd prefer to deal with some pseudo-samurai warrior like Tatewaki rather than a lunatic surfer bum like his father."

"I can see your point. Now... now wait a minute. Why don't you forget about Inazuma and just use Ame? That sword's supposed to work for females, right?"

"Yes, but there are two problems. First, if I'm to have any realistic chance of destroying the demon, I need BOTH swords. Second, the sword Ame has been lost for the last century or more."

Ukyo winced. "That sounds like a pretty hopeless mess."

"Not exactly. You see, the swords are a pair. If I have one sword, there are ways to use it to locate the other."

"Another reason you need to talk to Kuno, right?" The extremely neutral expression on Yuri's face suddenly made everything click. Ukyo's eyes widened and she blurted, "You don't want to talk to him! You want to bust him out of the hospital!"

Yuri nodded reluctantly. "Yeah."

"But he's crazy... and dangerous! You could be risking people's lives if you...."

"Listen, Ukyo! If I don't get his help, that demon is going to keep running loose and a lot of people could end up hurt. Or dead! Besides, I've got other reasons for wanting to move Kuno to a safer location."

"Which are...?"

Yuri looked away, then turned back to Ukyo. "First of all, I need to

know whether Tatewaki Kuno has become one of the demon's minions."

"Minions!?"

"Yes. Since he carries the Funada bloodline, that means that he may have inherited some of the 'talents' I mentioned earlier. Unfortunately, those sorts of abilities, if left untrained, can leave a person dangerously vulnerable to outside influences. And then you mentioned that Kuno and the other guy changed into tigers.... One of the demon's specialties is transformation -- metamorphosis and shapeshifting, that sort of thing. Its minions or servants often take the form of predatory cats. Tigers are a particular favorite because of their strength and power."

The color drained from Ukyo's face. "Why is that?"

"Oh, didn't I tell you? The creature I'm chasing is a cat-demon."

"A cat-... cat-demon....?" the chef whispered in a sick voice.

Yuri nodded grimly. "That's right." Noticing that the chef looked like she was about to faint, the demon-hunter leaned forward and said, "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Really." However, it wasn't hard to guess that Ukyo was clearly lying.

Yuri continued, "Anyway, I already had a suspicion that the demon was in the Tokyo area, especially after that run-in with that beast who attacked you. But even then, I wasn't absolutely certain."

"Can't you tell.... I mean, the thing that attacked me certainly wasn't natural!"

"It's not that simple, Ukyo. There's actually quite a number of supernatural cat or feline entities. I wasn't sure whether the particular demon I was hunting was the one responsible for attacking you last night. A direct assault is not its style, you see. But after you told me about Kuno and this guy Ryoga...."

"Uh, Yuri?"

"Yes?"

"Can you tell if someone's possessed by this demon? What type of signs can you see?"

Yuri leaned back against the wall. "To answer your question, there are ways of finding out... certain rituals I could do. However, those methods take concentration and time. It isn't something you can do in the middle of a fight or during a casual conversation."

She cleared her throat and assumed a more scholarly demeanor. "Sometimes, there aren't any signs. Unfortunately, people don't go around with helpful signs saying 'Hello, I'm possessed'. And when you're dealing with particularly powerful or cunning entities, well.... A favorite trick is to hide deep inside its host, listening to everything that's going on, but leaving little or no sign of its

existence. The host can be totally unaware of the demon's presence."

"That's... that's hideous!"

Yuri gave her a cool stare. "That's why demons are EVIL. And that's why they have to be destroyed."

"How do you know that I'm not possessed?"

Yuri gave Ukyo a cool grin. "I took the liberty of checking you out last night."

The chef looked uneasy. "You did?"

"Yes. Don't worry. All I was doing was making a detailed reading of your 'aura'."

"Oh."

Yuri added thoughtfully, "I've been damn lucky so far. I'm pretty sure that my quarry is unaware of my pursuit. The longer I can keep that a secret, the better it is for me. If the demon finds out I'm chasing it, it might decide to start hunting ME."

Ukyo grimaced. "That would be bad, right?"

"Oh, definitely. Besides, I've got another reason for wanting to get Tatewaki Kuno out of the hospital. At the moment, Kuno's an hopelessly easy target if the demon decides to clear up some loose ends."

Ukyo blurted, "Then... then Ryoga's in the same danger! We can't leave him...."

Yuri shook her head firmly. "I understand your concern, but we're going to have enough trouble dealing with Kuno by himself. And this may sound rather callous to you, but Tatewaki Kuno is a blood relation to me and therefore has a claim to my protection. On the other hand, this Ryoga character is a complete stranger."

Before Ukyo could object further, Yuri added, "That's not to say that I won't help him if I can, but I have to prioritize."

The chef bit her lip and said, "I want to come with you."

"What?"

"When you go to... get Kuno. I want to come along."

"Listen, Ukyo. I'd prefer to not get you any further involved. For one thing, some of the things I'll have to do are probably quite illegal. Second, we're talking about a demon here! Get mixed up with a creature like that and you could easily end up dead. Or worse."

Ukyo said angrily. "I've told you before! I think it's way too late for me to stay uninvolved. It's pretty clear that I've already been targeted and I've got the wounds to prove it!"

"But...."

"Listen! With my injuries, you'll have a perfect excuse to move around the hospital."

"Hmmm. That's true, but.... Didn't Ranma or Akane mention a Dr. Tofu? Do you think that there's any chance we could convince him...."

"But we would have to explain exactly what's going on. I'd... rather not get anyone else involved either."

"Well, at least we should definitely tell Ranma...."

"NO!"

Yuri blinked in surprise at Ukyo's vehement refusal.

"No," the chef repeated in a softer voice.

(Oh no, we can't! If I'm right.... If Ranma....)

Yuri said carefully, "Ukyo, he's already been attacked once. He needs to know just what he's up against."

"But.... I...."

Yuri slowly rose to her feet. "Ukyo, is there something you need to tell me? Why don't you want me to tell Ranma about this demon?"

Running her hands through her hair, Ukyo whispered, "You said you followed this demon's trail all over China and Japan. How old is the trail?"

"The trail? When I started searching, its trail was about twelve years old. That's about the time my clan was destroyed. I've been steadily gaining on it ever since. By the time I ended up in China just over a month ago, the trail was a little less than two years old. Why?"

Ukyo buried her face in her hands.

In a cool voice, Yuri said, "You know who it is... or you have a strong suspicion who it might be. Don't you?"

"NO! I mean, not for certain."

"Who, Ukyo? Who are you trying to protect? Don't you realize that you're not doing anyone any good by hiding this information?"

"I can't...."

"Damn it, Ukyo!"

Instead of answering Yuri's question, the chef countered with one of her own. "If someone's possessed, they can be cured... right?"

"That... kind of... depends."

"Depends on WHAT?"

"There's a lot of different factors... length of possession, power of the possessing entity, how much corruption's taken place... there's no way of knowing until you actually try to get rid of it. Sometimes it works. Sometimes it doesn't."

"Oh."

"Why are you asking?"

"I... just wanted to know."

Yuri stared thoughtfully at Ukyo, then she slammed both hands down on the counter and blurted, "You think Ranma's the demon's host!"

Ukyo refused to answer.

"But that doesn't make any sense!"

"Why not?" It was Ukyo's turn to look astonished.

"Because you told me that Ranma was the person who got attacked by Kuno and Ryoga. Why would the demon want its minions to injure its own host? It doesn't make any sense unless...." Yuri abruptly sat down.

"Unless WHAT!?" shouted Ukyo.

"Unless something went terribly wrong with the possession...."

> (end of Part 5) <p>

Author's Notes:

In Part 6 of Tiger Claw...

....a confrontation with Dan Xin....

> <p>

....Cologne reappears....

> <p>

....Tarou pays a visit....

^_-

> CREDITS: <p>

Additional inspiration from:

"The Whisper" by Queensryche

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 REJAR by Dara Joy. <p>

Additional fanfic mentions: ^_^

"Hearts of Ice" by Krista Perry and "Nekophobia" by David Eddy for starting my obsessive interest in the neko-stuff.

Many thanks to my pre-readers, for their suggestions, critiques, and support. ^_^

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 > ----- <p>

6. Part 6

> <meta name="generator"> Ranma 1/2 - Tiger Claw (part 6)

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> <p>

TIGER CLAW: A Ranma 1/2 fanfic - by Madamhydra@aol.com

> =====

Part 6: DARKENING HEARTS (part II)

> =====
 <p>

 > Disclaimer

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 > IMPORTANT NOTE:

This is a CONTINUATION-ALTERNATE REALITY fanfic. While I follow the manga (and video) continuity to just after Mount Phoenix (volume 38), the subsequent wedding ceremony (and the related bombing by Shampoo and Ukyo) does NOT occur. In this story, a different incident involving the planned wedding took place.

> <p>

Only a limited number of the main characters have actually SEEN the Neko-ken (the Tendos, Genma, Shampoo, Cologne, Gosunkugi or Sasuke, and Kuno), although others may have heard rumors about it.

> Text Conventions

() and / / - thoughts
> <p>

- sound fx
> <p>

" " - Chinese
> <p>

Curse forms are denoted by appropriate suffixes (-chan, -neko, -panda, etc.) except for Ryoga (P-chan) and Mousse (Muu-muu).

> Part 6#:

Dan Xin knew Cologne was watching her. In turn, Cologne knew that Dan Xin was perfectly aware of being watched. They continued their little mind game throughout the night and into the morning. Despite the Amazon Elder's best efforts, Dan Xin's only activity appeared to be frequent phone conversations. Some of these conversations appeared innocent enough, but other discussions were obviously in some sort of prearranged code.

It was soon after one such coded call that Cologne sensed several people stalking her. She drew herself up straight and said, "Come out. Enough of this foolishness."

Six people, dressed in black, emerged from cover and surrounded the old Amazon. They were all masked and heavily armed with various bladed weapons. One of them said, "You're pretty eager to die, old crone."

Cologne chuckled ominously. "Aren't you the arrogant little pup? But I have business to attend to and I'm not in the mood to play with children."

"What do you mean, 'Play with children?'" The speaker hissed angrily. "Let me assure you that we're quite serious."

Another masked figure snarled, "Deadly serious!" while whirling his blades in a threatening display.

Cologne coolly surveyed her opponents. They displayed a considerable degree of skill, but it was also obvious to her expert eye that they were all young and painfully inexperienced. She sniffed and said scornfully, "Is this the best Dan Xin can do? No, let me guess. She agreed to hire you only if you proved your skill by defeating me. Is that it?"

"Shut up!"

"You fools! She's just using you as fodder...."

"HIYYAAAAA!!!" The six masked people pounced on the old woman, blades flashing.

A few seconds later, Cologne sat perched on her walking stick. Without so much as a glance at the unconscious attackers lying on the ground, she peered around angrily, but to no avail. The fools had been no real challenge, but they had served their purpose all too well.

Dan Xin was gone.

"The hour is almost up and we still haven't seen any trace of Mousse!"

Ranma pushed his hand through his hair. "You're right. I guess we should head for the Neko-hanten. Maybe Shampoo's had better luck."

They were only a block away from the restaurant when Ranma abruptly froze in mid-step. Akane said, "What's wrong?"

At that moment, a petite, black-haired woman stepped out from an alleyway. With the crane-crested sword on her back and the snugly fitting red leather outfit, it could be none other than the infamous Dan Xin.

"Ranma Saotome. So you're the pretty boy who's been causing my silly little cousin so much trouble." Surprisingly, Dan Xin's Japanese turned out to be excellent. Aside from the leather costume -- outrageous for the way it clung to her well-developed figure, not for its lack of coverage -- she looked harmless and innocent enough. But the malicious gleam in her eyes and the mockery in her voice belied her cute looks. This was a woman who shouldn't be taken lightly.

Ranma edged in front of Akane and said, "Yeah. So what?"

Dan Xin noticed his protective gesture and smirked slightly. "And what do we have here? So this is the fabled Akane Tendo. Is she the reason you've been playing so hard to get?"

If the casual bystanders had been expecting Ranma's usual incoherent denials about 'that tomboy', they were in for a surprise. Instead, he said evenly, "It's none of your damn business. And you can cut out that cute act. I know you've got no interest in helping Shampoo."

Dan Xin smiled nastily. "Oh, I see that my cousin's already been telling tales about me. Envy is a terrible thing, isn't it? Oh well, in that case, we can get down to business."

"Business?" Ranma said warily.

Dan Xin took a few deliberate steps toward Ranma and Akane. After several years of living in close proximity to various high-powered martial artists, the bystanders in the area knew the warning signs. They prudently fled or retreated to a safe distance.

The ex-Amazon said lazily, "I've heard a lot about you. You're supposed to be quite good... for a male, that is. But I'm curious to see how good."

Ranma said angrily, "I'm not interested in fighting you or playing your stupid games. So quit making such a pain of yourself and go home."

"But that's so boring." She snapped her fingers and two more women stepped out of the alleyway. They were tall and graceful. The strong physical resemblance between the two women probably meant that they were related. One held a three-section staff while the other was equipped with a wicked looking spear.

Dan Xin pointed in Ranma's direction and said, "Ladies. Give the boy a workout."

The two women smiled viciously and advanced, the spearwoman moving to Ranma's right and the other woman edging to his left.

With a firm, but gentle shove, Ranma nudged Akane out of the way as he warily watched the women's approach.

"Ranma...", Akane started to protest, but there was an odd intensity in his eyes that made her fall silent and back away.

With no warning, the two women launched a perfectly coordinated attack. Unfortunately, an easy leap took their target well out of reach.

Landing several yards away, Ranma said, "This is all a big waste of time. I've got more important things to do."

The spearwoman's only response was to slash at his midsection, but Ranma easily slid away from the blow even as he ducked to let the swinging end of the three-section staff sweep just above his head.

At first, Akane was a bit concerned, but after the first few exchanges, she found herself relaxing. The two women were very good and clearly had a lot of practice fighting together as a team. However, as the fight continued, it became apparent that Ranma had the two women hopelessly outclassed in both the speed and skill department as shown by the effortless way he evaded their attacks.

Akane thought, (It's like fighting a wisp of smoke. I hate it when he does that! No matter how hard you try, you can't hit him!)

The scowls on the women's faces told Akane that they found Ranma's refusal to take offensive action just as aggravating as she did. However, the youngest Tendo found herself frowning as she watched Ranma weave away from a wicked staff swing.

(What's wrong with this fight?) Akane wondered. A few seconds later, she realized what was bothering her.

(I know... he's way too quiet! Ranma's usually boasting or trying to taunt his opponent into doing something stupid. But this time, he's barely said a thing during the fight!)

And there was something else strange about this particular battle. Most people wouldn't have noticed, but she was intimately familiar with Ranma's fighting style and technique. Something had changed. There was an uncanny precision and fluidity to Ranma's movements that she had never seen before. Considering Ranma's usual level of skill, that was saying a lot.

Absorbed in watching the fight, it took Akane a few seconds to notice that she was no longer standing alone. With a nervous start, she realized Dan Xin was standing right beside her. The ex-Amazon looked rather displeased as she watched the one-sided battle.

The two female challengers finally backed off a bit as they tried to catch their breath. Despite their repeated efforts, they hadn't even succeeded in forcing Ranma into blocking any of their attacks.

The spearwoman muttered, "Not... bad. But don't get... cocky, boy."

Ranma didn't bother to answer. His only response was a faint, quirky grin.

(The jerk's actually enjoying himself! He's just playing with them!) fumed Akane.

She suddenly noticed some movement in the alleyway behind Ranma. Squinting slightly, she was horrified to realize that there was another figure lurking in the shadows. The figure tensed and crouched, as if preparing to launch a sneak attack.

Akane stepped forward and started to shout, "Ra...." Her warning was abruptly cut short as her neck encountered the razor sharp edge of Dan Xin's sword. She felt a sharp sting and something wet trickled down her throat.

Dan Xin briefly glanced away from the fight in order to give Akane a mocking look. "Hush, now. We don't want to...."

The hidden attacker lunged out of the alleyway.

Ranma WAS enjoying himself. There was a crazy sense of exhilaration racing through his blood. The fact that his opponents were trying their best to seriously injure or kill him didn't do a single thing to spoil his enjoyment. In fact, their deadly intentions only made

the whole game more exciting.

....then he heard the rasp of drawn steel....

....and caught the scent of Akane's blood....

No threats. No warning.

There was just a dark blur of motion. Akane felt a rush of air, then she heard a loud thud mixed with a barely audible cracking sound, followed by a startled cry of pain as Dan Xin went flying into the air. The ex-Amazon slammed into a nearby brick wall with enough force to shake the adjacent building and to send little fragments of broken brick pattering to the ground.

At the exact same moment, there was a crash as all three of Dan Xin's fighters collided as their target seemed to vanish right before their eyes. The three women ended up in a stunned heap on the pavement.

There was dead silence as Ranma -- now standing only a few feet away from Akane -- gracefully finished up his roundhouse kick.

Stunned, Akane could only gape at him. Gradually, the murmurs of the bystanders finally registered.

"Wow! Did you see that?"

> <p>

"See what!? I didn't even see him move!"

> <p>

"I don't believe it! Ranma actually hit a girl!?"

Sprawled on the ground, Dan Xin wiped a trickle of blood from her chin. As she mentally berated herself for her carelessness, the ex-Amazon glared furiously at Ranma and snarled, "You little bastard! You'll pay for that!"

"Touch Akane again and I'll break every bone in your body." Ranma's voice was calm, almost conversational.

"Don't make threats you can't possibly keep!" With a sharp hiss of pain, the ex-Amazon staggered to her feet. Tossing her hair out of her face, she lifted her sword, then suddenly glanced over her shoulder.

"Damn that old bitch!" Dan Xin slammed her sword back into its scabbard. With a curt snap of her wrist, she sent her fighters on their way. Before leaving the scene herself, Dan Xin purred ominously, "Enjoy this little victory while you can, Saotome." With a grace only slightly hampered by her injuries, Dan Xin jumped to a nearby rooftop and disappeared from sight.

Ranma impassively watched the Amazon outcast vanish. As Akane struggled to find something to say to him, Ranma gently grabbed her chin and pushed her head back in order to get a better look at the

shallow cut on her neck. He wiped away the few blood drops with his thumb and silently stared at the small reddish smear on his fingertips.

Akane didn't quite know how to react. No matter how she tried to deny it, there was something terribly romantic... and flattering... about having a guy willing to fight for you. On the other hand, her pride as a martial artist was badly stung. She hated the implication that she couldn't take care of herself.

(But it's true. Half the time, I can't. Ranma's always rescuing me, getting me out of trouble....) And that hurt.

It had taken Akane a surprisingly long time to accept the unpleasant truth that there was no way on earth that she would ever come close to Ranma's level.

(I kept hoping that something would happen and that I would miraculously improve. I'd daydream of becoming this terrific martial artist overnight... then he'd have to stop calling me clumsy and slow. He'd have to respect me then.... What an idiot! I've been a martial artist for most of my life. I should have known better. The only real way to improve is lots of hard work... and training.)

(I may never be as good as Ranma, but I'll be damned if I'm going to be a WORSE martial artist than his other so-called fiancées!)

After coming back from Mount Phoenix, she had set out to improve her fighting skill with her typical combination of enthusiasm and stubbornness. For the first few weeks, she had relentlessly pestered Ranma into training her. All that effort had gotten her absolutely nowhere and her frustration had made her almost impossible to live with.

It had taken some chance comments by Cologne, of all people, and a long conversation with Dr. Tofu to make her realize what part of the problem was.

Ranma was not the best of teachers. He was TOO good. It wasn't that he lacked the patience, but with his ability to pick up new techniques practically overnight, he had a hard time adjusting to the slower learning speeds of other people.

(Okay, so it occasionally takes me a while to learn certain moves....)

Dr. Tofu had tactfully suggested that she find another teacher... one who was more used to dealing with student of her skill level.

Her father had been pretty much out of the question. He had stopped teaching long ago and ever since Genma Saotome showed up.... Fortunately, Dr. Tofu located an old school friend who lived nearby and ran a reputable training dojo.

Nabiki knew, of course. She had needed her older sister's help in order to pay for the lessons, even though the fees were very modest. Nabiki had smirked knowingly, but that was about it.

Ranma's reaction had been... peculiar. It couldn't have taken him very long to figure out that she was now training at another dojo. Instead of calling her a quitter or taunting her about not being a good enough student, he had said... absolutely nothing. At first her feelings were badly hurt.

(I thought he might have been glad that I stopped pestering him... I really wondered if he just didn't care about me.)

But when he made an determined effort to be a little nicer to her, she had gradually realized that he definitely DID care about her.
> Whatever reasons Ranma had for keeping his mouth shut on the subject, it definitely wasn't because of a lack of feeling on his part. <p>

Akane's introspective mood was abruptly broken when Ranma stepped back and said irritably, "How could you let a kook like Dan Xin get so close to you?"

She blinked, then sputtered in fury, "What do you mean by that!? YOU were the one playing stupid games with those women!"

"What the hell does THAT have to do with you nearly getting your throat cut!?"

The anger was a relief. As long as she was angry, she wouldn't have to think about what had just happened. Akane shouted, "Oh, so I suppose now you're going to call me 'stupid' and 'clumsy' for letting Dan Xin sneak up on me...!"

But her anger fizzed as Ranma grabbed her shoulders and said, "You're NOT stupid... or clumsy!" He shook his head. "I just want you to be more careful. Can't you get it through your head? I don't want to see you hurt."

He abruptly let go of her. As he turned to look at the dent Dan Xin had made in the brick wall, he absently licked Akane's blood from his finger. A second later, Ranma muttered, "You're lucky, you know. Considering what Shampoo told us about her cousin, I wouldn't put it past Dan Xin to do something nasty like put poison on that stupid sword of hers."

Busy staring at her feet, Akane nodded wordlessly. As she tried to find something to say, Cologne suddenly hopped into the street. The Amazon elder eyed the damaged wall and said, "By any chance, did a young woman in a red...."

Ranma tossed his head irritably and muttered, "Yeah, we've just had a run-in with Dan Xin."

"You know of her?"

"Shampoo warned us about her cousin when she showed up at Ukyo's restaurant. She was looking for Mousse."

"No need to worry about the fool boy. I know exactly where he is." Cologne's eyes narrowed slightly. "Did she actually attack you?"

"Not me. She got some of her female goons to do her dirty work for her."

"But they attacked you on her orders, correct? Hmmmm. Interesting." The old woman thought, (It might be stretching a point, but it might be enough for my purposes. Although she didn't participate in the actual attack on Ranma, she did order it done.)

"But she cut Akane's neck with that sword of hers," Ranma added.

Cologne hopped up on her staff to get a better look at the shallow wound.

Akane edged away from the old woman. "I'm fine... really. It's just like a paper cut."

The Elder snorted. "You forget who you're dealing with. Dan Xin's been known to coat her blades with all sorts of unpleasant substances. Come to the restaurant, child. I want to get a better look at it."

Ranma calmly said, "Dan Xin didn't do anything nasty this time."

The Elder gave him a sharp look. (How does he know that?)

"But I really need to talk to you, Cologne."

As the old Amazon led the way back to the Neko-hanten, she thought, (Now isn't that interesting? He called me by name. Not 'old ghoul' or 'dried up mummy'.... My, he must be worried about something.)

Shampoo was waiting for them at the restaurant. When she saw her great grandmother escorting Ranma and Akane inside, the Amazon girl paled and tensed slightly.

(What has that girl been up to?) Cologne wondered. Aloud, she merely said, "Shampoo, bring me some water and a clean cloth! And don't forget the green bottle on the top right-hand shelf."

She turned to Akane and said, "Sit, child. Now Ranma, what's on your mind?"

Ranma glanced at Akane. Before the youngest Tendo could say a word, Cologne said crisply to her, "You stay quiet. I can't examine this wound properly if your throat's bobbing about."

The pig-tailed young man raked his hands through his hair and said, "Well, it all started yesterday morning when Mom, Ukyo, Shampoo, AND Kodachi all showed up at the front door."

Cologne glanced sharply at Shampoo. The girl shrugged. "Shampoo not only one to get message."

Ranma said, "That was just the beginning. And after that... things

got... nasty."

Her hands busy cleaning Akane's neck, the Amazon Elder chuckled, "That's no surprise."

His voice unusually somber, Ranma said quietly, "No. I mean REALLY nasty. Kuno and Ryoga showed up with some loony idea that there was another secret wedding planned for Akane and me. I told them that I had no idea what they were babbling about. That didn't stop them from challenging me to a duel... two-on-one."

"Really? Both of them together?"

As Cologne finished by dabbing some clear liquid on Akane's throat, Ranma nodded, then looked away. He whispered, "I nearly killed them."

Her hands froze for a second, then Cologne said, "Tell me more."

Ranma declined to say anything so Akane took up the story. Over the next hour, she and Shampoo took turns explaining about Kuno and Ryoga's transformations into giant tigers, the ensuing battle, Ranma's mysterious cat-shaped battle aura... everything.

When the story finished up with their visit to Ukyo's restaurant, the old Amazon let out a long, rattling breath. Turning to Shampoo, she snapped, "Why didn't you tell me this yesterday!?"

Shampoo flushed angrily. "I tried, but you were too busy to listen to me!"

"Watch that tongue of yours, girl!" But Cologne had to admit that it really wasn't Shampoo's fault. She HAD been too wrapped up in Dan Xin and her own personal agenda to pay attention. Shaking her head, Cologne sighed and muttered, "Never mind, Shampoo."

Akane leaned forward and said, "Cologne, I remember you once said that you'd fought against someone who used the Neko-ken, right?"

"Not... exactly. It would be more correct to say that I 'encountered' someone who used the Cat-fist. Few people know of the Neko-ken, but it's no great secret. There are plenty of rumors and legends about it... IF you know where to look. But actually seeing it used... well, that's an entirely different matter. I have only encountered it once before meeting Ranma and that was well over a hundred years ago. " She glanced at Ranma's turned back. "Although the woman didn't show the same level of expertise in the Neko-ken as son-in-law here, defeating her in battle would have been exceedingly difficult."

"Is that why you gave up the Phoenix pill so easily?" Akane asked.

Cologne chuckled dryly. "Girl, part of being a warrior is knowing how to pick your battles carefully... something you youngsters have yet to learn."

"Oh...."

The old woman shook her head, "I probably know as much about the Neko-ken as anyone living, but I've never heard of anything like this cat-shaped battle aura before. And this disruption of chi in the boys' bodies... there ARE ways of doing such things. Those techniques are among the darkest of martial arts techniques because of their deadliness. It says a great deal about Tofu's skill that he managed to keep both Kuno and Ryoga alive."

Ranma spun around. In a harsh voice, he said, "Maybe YOU know something about those techniques, but I certainly DON'T!"

Cologne said, "Calm down, boy. Panicking won't do you any good. Obviously, we must find out exactly what's going on. Ignorance can easily have serious, perhaps fatal, consequences. First things first. After I take a look at you, I'll speak to Tofu. I also need to examine Ryoga and Kuno so I can get a better understanding of what's occurred. Now, is there anything else I should know?"

"Yeah," Ranma muttered. He glanced at Akane who picked up the basin of water and dumped it over his head.

Shampoo gaped in shock as she stared at Ranma-chan's new, more mature form. Even Cologne looked visibly startled. After a long moment, Shampoo cautiously approached, avoiding the puddles of cold water on the floor. She stared into Ranma-chan's face and poked at the young woman's breasts as if trying to confirm that Ranma had actually changed into a female form.

In a resigned voice, Ranma-chan said, "Shampoo, what the hell are you doing?"

"What happen to red hair!? You no girl anymore. You young woman!" the Amazon girl said in amazement.

Ranma-chan shrugged. "If I knew that.... It just... happened."

The Amazon Elder frowned. "Jusenkyo curses don't just 'change' unless... it's possible IF you've been doused with more Jusenkyo water."

Both Akane and Ranma-chan mutely shook their heads. Akane said, "We only found out about this... change... when Happosai splashed Ranma with a vase of water. But I don't think Happosai's responsible. He looked just as surprised as any of us! And it couldn't be the water in the vase because Kasumi said that she had changed that water just before dinner."

"Hmmm. As you well know, it takes extremely potent magic to affect Jusenkyo curses. And magic like that rarely happens by random chance."

(Especially something like this. There's something too precise... too deliberate... about the shift. Why do I get a feeling that this is no accident?)

Ranma-chan muttered, "I'm just glad I can still change back into a guy!"

"Ah, so that part of the curse has not changed. Shampoo?"

A quick splash of hot water and Ranma was soon back in his normal male form.

Cologne hopped back onto her stick and slowly circled Ranma, watching him closely. Next, she reached out and put a wrinkled hand on certain points of his body. Finally, she moved back and shook her head.

(Strange. I can't detect anything unnatural or wrong about Ranma's aura. There IS a change, but it's definitely not damage. His chi seems to have gotten stronger, more... vibrant.)

Aloud, the Elder murmured, "Well, this is a pretty problem. I have no convenient answers for you, son-in-law, but perhaps I will be able come up with something. As for you, you must take care not to use the Neko-ken again and avoid contact with cats."

"That's easy for you to say...", he muttered.

Cologne continued, "What occurred yesterday may be a singular event, brought on by an unique combination of circumstances. Then again, perhaps not."

Shampoo took a deep breath and said in a firm, even voice. "Great grandmother, I need to discuss something with you. In private."

"This better be important, Shampoo."

"It's very important, honored Elder."

Cologne nodded curtly, then turned back to Ranma and Akane. "I have some private matters to discuss with Shampoo. If you would excuse us?"

Ranma and Akane exchanged glances, then he shrugged. "Sure."

"Then before you go on your way, perhaps you could do me a favor and bring Mousse back to the Neko-hanten."

"No problem. Where is he?" said Ranma.

"On the roof of the grocery store near the park. Mousse is a bit tied up."

> Part 6#:

After Ranma and Akane departed on their errand, Cologne scowled at her great granddaughter. Shampoo looked like a warrior facing certain

death.

"Well? Hurry up, girl. This problem with your husband-to-be requires my immediate attention."

"That's just it, honored great grandmother." Shampoo took a few deep breathes, then said in a rush, "I no longer have any intention of marrying Ranma."

Cologne's eyes narrowed ominously. "Say what, Shampoo? Did I hear you correctly?"

"Yes."

"Don't be an idiot, girl! I don't know what put this fool notion in your head but do you have any idea of the consequences of making that statement?"

"Yes, I know," came Shampoo's flat reply.

"Does this have something to do with what happened to the boy yesterday?"

The Amazon girl nodded curtly.

"Don't tell me you're afraid of him! Or has living in this land of weaklings made you a coward, Shampoo? If we can control this new ability of his... if others can learn it.... Don't you realize how valuable Ranma and his bloodline could be? Think of what he could do for our village!"

Cologne thought angrily, (The fool girl's going to ruin my plan to get rid of Dan Xin once and for all! If Shampoo forswears her rights to wed Ranma, he can't be considered a member of the tribe. Dan Xin's attack on him won't qualify as a crime under Amazon law.)

Shampoo turned pale with suppressed emotion and a familiar expression of stubbornness appeared on her face. "I'm more concerned with what Ranma might do TO our village!" She stamped her foot angrily. "Don't you see, great grandmother? Ranma's made his decision. He wants Akane and he'll do ANYTHING it takes to keep her! Nothing that you or I can do will ever change his mind!"

As the old woman continued to stare sternly at Shampoo, she wondered, (Such determination in the girl's voice. But why?)

Seeing Cologne apparently unmoved by her words, Shampoo thought despairingly, (She doesn't understand. She wasn't THERE. She didn't see the expression in his eyes....)

"Great granddaughter, do you realize that you're deliberately flouting centuries of Amazon custom and law? Are you willing to face permanent exile -- possibly death! -- in order to stand by this foolish whim of yours?"

Shampoo forced herself to meet Cologne's stern gaze. "It's no whim. And as for the consequences... I'll deal with them as they come."

Cologne sighed wearily. "Why, Shampoo? Explain this to me. Give me a

reason -- just one good reason -- that I can put before the Council of Elders to excuse this outrageous breach of custom."

Shampoo closed her eyes briefly before saying, "The reason that I gave you is the only reason I have. That and a feeling...."

"A feeling!?"

The Amazon girl rubbed her arms as if fighting off a chill. "Yes. It's a feeling of... foreboding. If something or someone tries to interfere between Ranma and Akane...." She shifted uncomfortably. "That's all."

Cologne gazed thoughtfully at her great granddaughter before saying, "Very well. If you are willing to accept the consequences, then I am not going to force the issue. But the consequences start now. Take your things and leave this place."

Shampoo gasped but said nothing.

"You have chosen to cast aside Amazon custom and Amazon law. Thus, you have no claim to the protection and hospitality of any member of the tribe."

Shampoo lowered her head. Her shoulders sagged and her chin quivered as she bit her lip. For a moment, Cologne hoped the girl would give up her defiance. However, the Elder couldn't help but feel a bittersweet surge of pride at Shampoo's determination as she watched the girl clench her teeth and lift her head proudly.

Moving quickly among the rooftops of Nerima, it took Ranma and Akane only a few minutes to reach the grocery store. Looking around, she said, "Well, this is the place. But I don't see Mousse anywhere."

Ranma cocked his head slightly as he listened intently.

"Ranma...."

"I heard something. From over there."

As Cologne had said, Mousse was all tied up. Literally.

That morning, he had left the Neko-hanten with no particular destination or purpose in mind. Perhaps there was a half-formed idea of finding Dan Xin... or perhaps not. Unfortunately, he had encountered Cologne first. With no warning, the old ghouel had him transformed into duck-form and bound in the blink of an eye. He had spent the last several hours stuck on a hot rooftop, completely immobilized and unable to utter so much as a squawk.

Suddenly, he heard someone jump onto the roof. He wiggled frantically, hoping that somebody would find and untie him.

Akane's voice said, "Where? Are you sure?"

To his shock, Mousse heard Ranma answer Akane's question.

"He's right here."

(Ranma!?) Mousse remembered all too clearly the last time he had seen Ranma Saotome. It had been an unforgettable sight and one that would haunt his nightmares for days to come.

"Good grief!" muttered Akane. All she could see was a duck-sized bundle of clothes tightly wound with chains. A few white tail feathers protruded from one end of the bundle.

Ranma pulled some of the chains loose and freed Muu-Muu's head.

"You okay?"

The duck could only stare at Ranma with an air of total bewilderment, his beak hanging open.

(He's acting... normal!)

Considering that he had last seen his rival -- no, make that former rival -- running around on all fours, covered in blood and snarling like some sort of rabid beast, the sight and sound of a perfectly coherent and rational Ranma was more than a little shocking.

"Aren't you going take the rest of that stuff off of him?" asked Akane.

"Nope." Ranma tucked the still bundled-up Muu-Muu under one arm. "Not until we get back to the restaurant. Maybe Shampoo or Cologne can pound some sense into him before he does something really stupid."

The duck let out an indignant squawk and barely managed to restrain himself from nipping.

Ranma muttered, "Sorry, man. Shampoo's been frantic. She's been kinda worried about you."

(Really!?)

They returned to the Neko-hanten just in time to see a despondent Shampoo stepping out of her bedroom with a suitcase in hand. Dumping Muu-Muu on a table, Ranma worriedly said, "What's wrong?"

Cologne said sternly, "Shampoo is just leaving."

"Leaving!"

(Leaving!) Muu-Muu silently echoed.

"Yes. She has informed me of her decision to forego her right -- and duty -- to marry you. Since she has chosen to flout Amazon law, she has no place here."

Akane glared at Cologne and muttered something about crazy Amazon traditions. But as she watched a subdued Shampoo preparing to leave, Akane silently wondered, (So where is she going now? Does she have anywhere else to go?)

The same question was apparently bothering Ranma. He quietly said, "Shampoo, do you have some place to stay?"

The Amazon girl shrugged. "Not yet, but Shampoo find place soon."

Ranma seemed to find Shampoo's answer rather troubling. He flicked a quick glance at Akane, but said nothing.

The youngest Tendo daughter found herself feeling sorry for the other girl. (Come on. There's got to be some place where she could stay....) However, she couldn't think of a location right off the top of her head, except for the obvious one... the Tendo dojo.

(But... but what if all of this is just a plot to get Shampoo closer to Ranma?) Akane bit her lip uncertainly. (On the other hand, Nabiki seems to think that Shampoo really is giving up on Ranma. And I don't see any reason for Nabiki to lie about something like that. And Shampoo hasn't tried to glomp him or anything like that....)

(Damn it. I hope I'm not making a big mistake here,) thought Akane. She took a deep breath, then said, "Then why don't you stay with us... for a little while, at least?"

The Amazon looked startled by the offer. "But... Shampoo turn into cat...."

Akane said, "Oh... right. I suppose you could stay at Ukyo's place...." Her voice faltered as Shampoo winced visibly.

(Darn. I totally forgot. Nabiki said that Shampoo and Ukyo had a nasty confrontation yesterday.)

"In that case, you don't have much of a choice except to stay with us. Unless Ranma...." Akane glanced over in his direction.

He shrugged neutrally and said, "I don't have a problem with Shampoo staying. I guess we'll just have to be careful. Besides, Akane's right. You need a place to stay, at least for a few days until you come up with something better."

"Thanks," murmured Shampoo. She didn't look back at her great grandmother as she and Akane left the Neko-hanten.

As the two girls waited outside the restaurant for Ranma, Akane leaned over to Shampoo and said sharply, "Listen, Shampoo. I'm sorry that Cologne threw you out and I don't mind offering you a place to stay, but if this is some sort of kooky scheme to snuggle up to Ranma, I'll...."

The Amazon replied, "Word of honor, Akane." With exquisite care, she said very carefully in grammatically correct Japanese, "I will not try to cause any more trouble between you and Ranma. He has made his choice. I accept that choice. I will not interfere."

"Shampoo... I...", stuttered Akane, taken aback by the almost grim determination in Shampoo's face. "If you're talking about what happened yesterday morning.... That wasn't...." In somewhat disbelieving tones, she added, "You're serious."

"Deadly serious."

Just as Ranma was about to follow the two girls out the door, Cologne quietly said, "I also thank you."

"Huh?"

"It's good to know that Shampoo won't be alone." She gave him a somber look. "Dan Xin is still out there."

"I know. But I should tell you that Dan Xin really has it in for me now. She apparently thinks I humiliated her in public or something. If Shampoo sticks around me, she's liable to become a target."

"Perhaps, but Shampoo and Dan Xin already hate each other deeply. Staying with you and the Tendos would not put Shampoo in any greater danger than if she stayed here with me. She may even be in less danger, considering the past history between myself and Dan Xin."

Ranma frowned and said accusingly, "You know Dan Xin's hanging around with her goons, but you went ahead and threw Shampoo out into the street anyway, didn't you?"

"Custom is a hard and demanding mistress," Cologne calmly stated.

His eyes narrowed. "It's a test, isn't it? This whole damn thing is a test for Shampoo. You're trying to figure out just how determined she is. You want to see just how far she's willing to go with her decision. Don't you realize she could get seriously hurt or maybe even die!?"

Cologne's voice was harsh and unyielding. "Even though she claims to be willing to deal with the consequences, Shampoo is still young and inexperienced. I want to make certain that she knows the cost of defying our traditions while there was still time for her to change her mind. Depending on how the Council views her decision, death could easily be one of those consequences."

"You knew Akane would offer her a place to stay."

"I wasn't certain, but it was very likely. Akane can be a fool at times and she lacks self-control, but the girl also has a generous nature. However, while having Shampoo stay at the dojo has its advantages, it's also not without its hazards. Her Jusenkyo curse...."

He nodded grimly. "It's a problem, but I'm willing to take the risk. This may be a part of some complicated scheme of yours, but it doesn't matter. Like you said, Dan Xin's still out there and I don't want Shampoo getting hurt. After what happened yesterday, I'm sure Shampoo won't be doing something stupid like chasing me around in her cat-form. And if worst comes to worst... Akane's there."

"Very well. I'll get in touch as soon as I find any useful information. One last thing."

"Yeah?"

"Shampoo claims that you've made your decision. Is that true?"

There was a long silence, then the young man gave the Amazon Elder a polite bow of the head before leaving her alone with Muu-Muu. To Cologne, Ranma's silence was more eloquent than any grand declaration of love.

"Hmph. Perhaps the girl's not such a fool after all."

At first, she had been inclined to dismiss Shampoo's decision as a mere over-reaction to Ranma's feral behavior of the day before. Now she wasn't so certain. It occurred to the Elder that Shampoo might have had a perfectly legitimate reason for her actions, even though the girl's explanation left much to be desired.

It had been one of the great disappointments in Cologne's life that practically none of her descendants had inherited her more arcane gifts, but the old woman thought, (I wonder... is it possible that the incident with Kuno and Ryoga has awakened some power in Shampoo? It's not unheard of.)

(Power calls to power. If Shampoo sensed something, then her decision to give up on Ranma might be excusable....)

There was definitely something going on with that young man aside from the incredibly quick physical recovery, the increased aggressiveness of his cat-state, and the new aspects of the Neko-ken. Ranma's agility and dexterity had always been exceptional, but now there was a languid, almost feline grace in his movements. Also, he had always had a very well-developed sense of his surroundings, but now this 'situational awareness' seemed significantly more acute than before.

(The way he seems to notice everything around him.... How on earth could he be certain that Akane wasn't poisoned by Dan Xin's blade? Can it be that he's somehow retained some of the Neko-ken's abilities even after he awakened from his cat-state? If that's the case, he'd make a truly formidable opponent.)

And there was another thing that caught Cologne's attention. (How very interesting that he figured out my intention to test Shampoo so quickly. Ranma's no fool, but his abilities have always been more in the realm of combat tactics, not intrigue. That's always been Nabiki's strength, not his.)

"What a puzzle you've become, boy."

With a faint sigh, Cologne turned to deal with Muu-Muu. A quick snap of her wrist and the duck rolled free of the chains and clothes. He shook his feathers into order, then glared furiously at the old woman.

SQUAWK!

Cologne calmly smacked Muu-Muu on the head with her stick before heading off for some hot water.

Back in human form, the first thing out of Mousse's mouth was, "How could you cast Shampoo out like that, especially with the bitch Dan Xin lurking around!"

"Shut up, boy. You know the laws as well as I do. And I know you're not deaf. You heard what I told Ranma."

"But...."

"And you should remember that you have no lawful basis for a vendetta against Dan Xin. She defeated your mother in fair trial-by-combat. Challenge Dan Xin to mortal combat if you like, but you do so strictly as one martial artist against another martial artist."

Mousse scowled and adjusted his glasses. As he turned in the general direction of the Neko-hanten's front door, Cologne whacked him again with her stick.

"If you're headed for the Tendo dojo, you're more fool than I thought... which is saying a good deal. After what happened yesterday, Ranma's bound to view your presence at his home most unfavorably."

"You... you know what happened yesterday!?"

"The events involving Kuno and Ryoga? Yes, indeed."

"And you're letting Shampoo stay there with that lunatic!?"

Cologne cackled softly. "Oh, I'm beginning to suspect that the Tendo dojo is probably the safest possible place for Shampoo to be."

> Part 6#:

Two young women in Nerima were nursing assorted bruises and making plans while another woman was working to keep her schemes moving....

Dan Xin gritted her teeth in pain as she gingerly probed her ribs.

"Damn that Saotome!"

Things had not gone well for the ex-Amazon. For one thing, Ranma Saotome had turned out to be a much better martial artist than she had anticipated... so good that three of her best fighters couldn't even touch him.

She could almost hear her subordinates snickering at her for being caught so easily off-guard by Ranma's sudden attack. It only made her loathe the young man even more.

(Oh, he'll pay... and pay dearly!)

Her phone buzzed loudly. She flipped it open and snarled, "What!?"

Her employer murmured, "My, aren't we testy today? I just wanted to tell you that I've finally managed to track down the most likely location of the Shadow Scroll."

"Where is it?" Dan Xin sat up abruptly, ignoring the grinding pain in her ribs.

"The information I gathered indicates that the Scroll's hidden inside an old training manual... something to do with a martial arts technique called the 'Cat-fist'. The book used to belong to a shrine at the very northern tip of Honshu, but it apparently disappeared after Genma Saotome visited the shrine with his son."

"Ah ha!"

"The elder Saotome has a reputation for 'borrowing' things that don't belong to him. It's most likely he's the thief."

"Saotome, hm? And he's now living at the Tendo dojo...."

"Exactly." Her employer's voice became somewhat uneasy. "You do remember my warning about Akane Tendo, right?"

Dan Xin snarled silently even as she spoke in a very soothing voice. "Oh, absolutely." But even as she spoke, the former Amazon pressed her fingers hard into her side. The pain was excruciating, but she wanted it that way. Every bit of her suffering was Saotome's fault. She would return that pain a hundred times over.

Dan Xin smiled evilly. She purred, "Don't worry about it. I'll have the Shadow Scroll in no time."

"Well, that's why I'm paying you this absurd amount of money. I expect results."

The former Amazon chuckled. She said, "Just leave the details to me. You won't be disappointed," then hung up.

On the other side of town, Yonoko put her phone away. A malevolent smile appeared on her lips as she murmured, "Oh, I'm counting on it."

Kodachi staggered out of bed and muttered, "Damn that little tramp! I'll teach her to interfere with me, the Black Rose!" As she tried to rub the pain out of her neck, she shouted, "Sasuke!"

With a blur, the little ninja appeared. "Yes, Mistress Kodachi?"

"Get the car. I'm going to Mt. Iwate."

Sasuke gaped at Kodachi. "Excuse me?"

She glared at him and snarled, "You heard me! And get in touch with this horticulturist and tell this person I want to see them immediately!" Kodachi flung a piece of paper in the little ninja's face.

"Hurry up! I want to leave within the hour."

"Y-yes, mistress."

As she packed some clothes -- just in case -- Kodachi started to smile as she imagined Ranma's reaction to the pure, concentrated essence of fresh Umbra roses.

Bloodcurdling laughter was soon echoing through the hallways of the Kuno mansion.

"I quit! I can't deal with this anymore!"

"Please, I'll double your pay, triple it!"

"Ugh! Do you know what it's like having that old lech around?"

"Five times your original fee. And I'll throw in a bonus. Consider it combat pay."

"Well... All right. But just how much longer do we have to put up with him?"

"Less than 24 hours."

There was a pained sigh from the other end of the phone line. "Five times, huh? Oh, all right."

Yonoko hung up the phone. Unlike the case with Dan Xin, she didn't begrudge those models the extra money. Not one bit. They deserved it for putting up with Happosai for so long.

> Part 6#:

Back in the Tendo house, Nabiki entered the kitchen to find Kasumi happily humming as she prepared dinner. Suddenly, Nabiki noticed a white towel on the countertop moving all on its own. As she stepped closer to get a better look, a small black cat peeked out from underneath the towel. It blinked big, smoky-blue eyes at her and meowed cheerfully.

"Kasumi! What are you doing with a cat in the house!?"

"The poor thing fell into the koi pond."

"Oh great. You KNOW how Ranma's going to react if he sees this little furball."

"But I couldn't just leave him in the water, Nabiki. The koi were so unhappy. They were harassing him."

"Is that ALL you can worry about? A kitty-cat getting molested by some fish? Kasumi...." Nabiki buried her face in her hands.

"And the poor thing was cold and wet...," Kasumi continued.

Her sister rolled her eyes and thought, (Why do I even bother?)

Nabiki snatched the cat up by the scruff of its neck and headed for the kitchen door. Instead of complaining about the rough treatment, it purred loudly. Normally, Nabiki Tendo was not very susceptible to cuteness, but this time, she somehow couldn't quite bring herself to throw the little beast out of the house... at least, not right away.

"Oh, all right, Kasumi! You win. Just make sure you get the furball out of here before Ranma comes back, okay?"

The little feline made a little chirping noise and gnawed playfully on Nabiki's hand.

> Part 6#:

A worried trio returned to the Tendo compound late that afternoon.

Shampoo was saddened by her banishment from the Neko-hanten. It wasn't an unexpected decision on Cologne's part, but it had still been a shock when it actually happened. Perhaps she'd been foolishly hoping for some miracle to save her from the trouble of actually defying her great grandmother. The only good thing was that Cologne had not seemed all that angry. Instead, the Amazon Elder had looked resigned, thoughtful... and tired.

As for Akane, she kept thinking about Ranma's fight with Dan Xin and her goons. The battle had been normal enough at first, with Ranma effortlessly dodging the women's attacks. But as soon as the renegade Amazon had pulled out her sword, everything had changed. Ranma's

response had been instant and devastating.

(I've never seen him move so fast before! One second, he's over thirty or forty feet away. The next instant, he's right next to me and BEHIND Dan Xin. He didn't go for the sword... he actually kicked her in the ribs! And he wasn't holding back... I HEARD her ribs snap. If Cologne hadn't been around... if Dan Xin hadn't run away... who knows how much further he would've gone....)

Right off the top of her head, Akane couldn't remember a time where Ranma had deliberately struck a woman in combat with a serious intent to injure... a normal human woman, that is.

(Rouge doesn't count. She's some weird three-headed demon half the time....)

Akane wasn't sure what bothered her the most -- the fact that Ranma had actually struck Dan Xin or the fact that he didn't seem to care that he had really tried to hurt the ex-Amazon.

(It's like his behavior from yesterday morning is somehow carrying over, even though he's no longer in his cat-mode. That's never happened before.)

Akane was wrong in assuming that Ranma was not bothered by his attack on Dan Xin. He was worried all right... worried because he didn't feel more upset.

/ Why be upset? /
> <p>

/ Dan Xin hurt Akane. /
> <p>

/ I stopped her. /
> <p>

/ It's as simple as that.... /

....and he still couldn't quite shake the odd, tantalizing sense of freedom that lingered at the edges of his mind.

They made their way to the kitchen where Kasumi was busy cooking dinner. Wiping her hands on a towel, the eldest Tendo daughter murmured, "You're back. How are your parents doing, Ranma?"

He shrugged, "They're okay. Dr. Tofu says that Pop should be able to leave the hospital in a day or two. Mom probably needs to stay a little while longer until her lungs get a bit stronger. The last thing she needs is to catch a cold or pneumonia on top of all that smoke inhalation."

"Oh dear."

Akane said, "Kasumi, Shampoo's going to be staying with us for a

little while."

Kasumi didn't bother to ask the reason why, but simply skipped to more practical matters. "How nice. But where will you sleep? Happosai's gone at the moment, but I really don't think you should use that room...."

"Uh, maybe Shampoo sleep in dojo?" the Amazon suggested tentatively.

"I don't mind sharing my bedroom, Shampoo. That is, if you don't mind sleeping on the floor," Akane said.

"Shampoo not want to impose..., " she said in a subdued voice.

Before Akane could argue further, Kasumi said, "Ranma, could you take one of the spare futons out to the dojo?"

"Sure thing."

After he left the kitchen, Akane said in a worried voice, "Are you're feeling okay, Shampoo?"

"Shampoo is a little upset, but it okay. Shampoo deal with it." She shrugged, but it was clear that she was feeling very depressed.

"I was going to take a bath, but if you need talk...."

The Amazon girl smiled faintly. "Is good idea to talk, but no big hurry. Shampoo wait after Akane's bath."

"Okay, see you later."

As Akane headed off to the bathroom, Nabiki wandered into the kitchen and said, "What's up?"

Kasumi smiled pleasantly and said, "Isn't it nice? Shampoo's going to staying with us for the next several days."

Observing the unhappy look on the Amazon girl's face, Nabiki refrained from her usual comments about freeloaders. "So what happened, Shampoo?"

The girl sighed wearily. "Shampoo tell great grandmother that Shampoo no longer want to marry Ranma. Great grandmother throw Shampoo out of Neko-hanten."

"Hmmm." Nabiki started, then glanced around quickly. "Is Ranma back, too?"

Kasumi has gone back to washing vegetables in the sink. "Yes. He's moving a futon out to the dojo for Shampoo."

"Uh, Kasumi, you DID remember to get rid of that cat, right?"

"Of course, Nabiki. I put the poor thing out into the street and closed the gate."

Shampoo cocked her head slightly. "Cat?"

"Yeah. Kasumi rescued this little cat from the koi pond. Cute little furball, but after what happened yesterday, I didn't want Ranma to come home and...."

"Aiyah! Bad thing if Ranma see cat so soon after Neko-ken!"

After dumping the futon and some sheets in a corner of the dojo, Ranma walked outside and sat down on the dojo's steps.

(That crazy Dan Xin. That look in her eyes. She's not finished by a long shot. I wonder what she'll do next.)

He shook his head. (And what up with Shampoo? What made her change her mind about trying to marry me so suddenly? I can't figure it out. It's sort of nice that I don't have to worry about her glomping me all the time and getting Akane mad, but I just don't get it. What could have possibly made her flat-out defy Cologne, of all people, and chuck aside all those centuries of that wacky Amazon tradition? I mean, it's good for me and Akane, but I hope she doesn't get into serious trouble over this. It's bad enough having to worry about this Dan Xin character. Cologne said something about death. Does that mean that the Amazons are going to come gunning for Shampoo?)

He got up and dusted his pants. (Maybe I should just ask her. I should probably also ask her a few more questions about Dan Xin. I'm sure she has a better idea what her cousin's capable of.)

Ranma had only taken a step or two toward the dojo's door when he abruptly froze. His skin crawled as he heard a familiar evil chuckle behind him.

(Oh man, not him. Not now. I can't deal with this....)

He slowly turned around to see the slim male figure standing in the Tendos' yard. "Oh hell. Not you again."

Tarou gave him a malicious grin. "What's the problem, fem-boy? You don't look happy to see me."

"I'm not. Damn it, just go away and leave me alone!"

Tarou snorted. "You're going to have to try a lot harder than that."

Ranma muttered, "What the hell do you want, Pantyhose?"

The young man with the unfortunate name smiled dangerously. One could almost see him putting a mark on some mental scoreboard. "I'm looking for Happosai, of course."

Ranma shrugged, "The last time I saw him, he was headed for downtown Tokyo by air express. So why don't you follow his example and buzz off!"

Tarou folded his arms and smirked. "Why should I waste my time chasing him all over town? He always comes back here. I think I'll

just settle down and wait for him to return."

"Like hell you will!" Ranma stalked down the steps toward the most infuriating of his rivals. Stopping a few steps away, he snarled, "Listen. I've had a REALLY lousy day so far! I've found out that my parents were nearly killed in a house fire, I've had Kodachi Kuno pawing all over me, Akane and I have been attacked by the goons of some crazy ex-Amazon, and I won't even begin to describe what happened to me YESTERDAY! And now YOU show up. Why is it that every time I see you, I end up getting the crap beat out of me...!"

Tarou shrugged. "Like that's my fault?"

"Of course it's your fault! You're always coming up with some kooky scheme to force Happosai to change your stupid name. And if it's not that, you're always managing to get me tangled up in fights with YOUR enemies! I've got enough problems of my own! I don't need to deal with yours as well!"

"Heh. I have a very simple solution to most of your problems. The next time someone challenges you, give up."

"Like hell I will!"

With a contemptuous stare, Tarou said, "You can't have it both ways, fem-boy. You want the reputation, you're going to have to fight to keep it... if you can. So don't whine to me about having too much trouble in your life."

The longer Tarou stood there in the Tendos' yard, the more irritated Ranma felt. This was his home. Tarou didn't belong here.

"Fine. A lot of my trouble is my own fault. But that doesn't mean I should have to deal with YOUR shit as well. Why can't you get it through your head? That old pervert is never, NEVER going to change your name. Just give it up and leave us out of it!"

Tarou smiled nastily. "Fine. Just hand over the little bastard and I'll be glad to leave you alone... for now."

"Have you been listening to a DAMN thing I've said, Pantyhose? He's NOT here! So quit bugging me! You better leave me alone or you're going to get HURT!"

Tarou looked totally unimpressed. "Oh, is that supposed to scare me, fem-boy?"

Ranma felt his hands curling slightly as he came steadily closer to losing his temper. He whispered ominously, "It should. It really should."

Tarou cocked his head slightly. "Hmm. Pretty good try. A nicely understated tone of menace and all that. So... what is a crossdressing idiot like you trying to hide?"

"You JERK! I'm not trying to hide anythin....!" Ranma's voice abruptly trailed off as he went totally rigid.

Tarou raised an eyebrow as he watched the color drain from Ranma's face and his eyes widen in horror. Unsure whether Ranma's fear was

genuine or just some sort of bizarre sneak trick, Tarou quickly glanced around. Nothing.

Meow

With growing fascination, Tarou watched Ranma look down at his feet... ever so slowly. Following his gaze, all he saw was a small, fuzzy black cat enthusiastically rubbing itself against Ranma's bare ankles.

"GYAAHHHHH!!!!"

Ranma's terrified scream made Tarou reflexively take up a defensive stance. The pig-tailed young man leapt away from the feline and cowered against the dojo wall, shaking like a leaf.

Meow?

The little feline gazed curiously at Ranma with its big blue eyes, then took a step in his direction.

"N-n-noooo!!!"

"What the....?" Tarou reached down and picked up the small black cat by the scruff of the neck. The cat objected strenuously to this treatment, hissing and snarling ferociously.

"T-t-t-take it away!"

Tarou snickered as he ignored the cat's frantic struggles. "Don't tell me you're afraid of this little fuzzball? Oh, this is TRULY pathetic." He held up the cat and took a step in Ranma's direction. The terrified martial artist flattened himself even more against the dojo wall as he watched the howling, flailing cat coming ever closer.

"S-s-s-stop it!!!"

Tarou tossed his head back and really started to laugh.

"GYAAHHHHH!!!!"

The women in the kitchen all stiffened as they hear the masculine scream of terror through the open window. Nabiki muttered, "What the hell...?" She flung open the kitchen door and ran out, followed closely by Shampoo. The sight that met their eyes chilled their blood.

....Ranma cowering against the dojo wall....
> <p>

....Tarou advancing with cat in hand, laughing....

"Shampoo! Get Akane! NOW!!!" Nabiki shouted.

"Right!" The Amazon bolted back into the house and raced to the bathroom.

Akane had been half asleep in the tub when something woke her out of her doze. It sounded like a muffled shout from outside... or was it just her imagination? She was just about to stand up when Shampoo burst into the inner bathroom.

Akane sputtered, "Shampoo! What do you think....?"

Shampoo grabbed Akane's arms and hauled her out of the tub. Thrusting a bathrobe at Akane with one hand, she grabbed Akane's wrist in the other and started to drag her toward the hallway.

"Come NOW!"

"What's....?"

The Amazon looked totally frantic. "Tarou here! He scaring Ranma with cat!!!"

Akane gaped, then babbled, "Tarou's here! A cat!? Oh no...!"

"YES! Akane come NOW!"

Akane dashed into the hallway, only half dressed in the bathrobe. Glancing around frantically, she shrieked, "Where are they!? Shampoo! Where!?"

"This way!" Shampoo shoved Akane in the direction of the dojo.

Ranma's first instinct upon seeing the cat was to run as far and as fast as possible, but then he heard Tarou's mocking laughter... laughter which triggered a cascade of fury through his body. It wasn't a blind berserker's rage, but rather a cold, calculating fury that burned in the very depths of his soul.

He knew exactly what he wanted. He wanted to feel Tarou's bones snapping between his teeth... he wanted to sink his claws into raw flesh... he wanted to feel his rival's hot blood trickling down his throat....

Torn between the desperate urge to flee and the overwhelming desire to rip his despised rival apart, Ranma collapsed onto the floor, clutching at his head and trembling.

"Tarou, stop it! Leave him alone!"

He turned at Nabiki's anxious shout. "And why should I do that?" he said in a bored, disinterested voice.

"Damn it! You have no idea what you're doing to him!" Nabiki quickly stepped between Tarou and the whimpering heap that was Ranma.

"And what exactly is that, Nabiki?"

A part of Ranma idly wondered if minotaurs had their own flavor. Or would they taste just like beef? Would Tarou's tentacles taste like the rest of him or would they really taste like octopus? Perhaps the wings would have the favor of chicken....

Nabiki whirled around as soon as Ranma started to make gagging noises.

(What the hell's going on? This is a hell of a lot worse than his usual panic attack. Where are you, Akane!?)

The back door burst open as Akane -- dressed only in a half-open bathrobe -- and Shampoo ran out into the yard. Akane headed straight for Ranma while the Amazon rushed over to stand beside Nabiki, forming a living wall between Tarou and Ranma.

"Ranma? Ranma!?" Akane cried frantically. Getting no response, she gave Tarou a furious stare, then grabbed her fiance's shoulders and started to drag him to the dojo door.

Although he acted as coolly as usual, Tarou was rather startled by the sheer intensity of Ranma's reaction and the girls' frantic response. He automatically hid his surprise by making a taunting comment.

"So where's your backbone, fem-boy? Now you need GIRLS to save your butt from the nasty old pussycat?"

To her horror, Akane sensed Ranma stiffen and start to pull away from her grasp. Even worse, she felt -- rather than heard -- him growl.

"SHAMPOO!!! GET OVER HERE!!!" shrieked Akane.

The Amazon whirled, ran over to Ranma, and grabbed a hold of his feet. With Shampoo's help, Akane quickly carted Ranma into the dojo like an oversized piece of baggage. The door slammed shut behind them.

As Tarou watched the entire scene with an air of bemusement, Nabiki took the opportunity to snatch the cat out of his grasp. As soon as the little feline was in Nabiki's hands, it immediately stopped struggling. The cat curled up in her arms where it panted and trembled. Stroking the cat, Nabiki coldly watched Tarou.

With an air of nonchalance, Tarou said, "Well, no wonder fem-boy isn't interested in marrying the cat-girl."

"Don't even try it."

Tarou smirked slightly. "Don't try what?"

"Don't even THINK of trying to take advantage of Ranma's cat phobia."

"Why not?" He folded his arms and gave Nabiki an insolent stare.

"Because the consequences can be serious... deadly serious. I mean it."

"So what happens?"

As she absently rubbed the black cat's ears, Nabiki said, "Considering that you're one of Ranma's worst enemies, surely you don't expect me to babble about his weak points."

Tarou sighed. "How much, Nabiki?"

Her eyes narrowed ominously as the little feline in her arms flattened its ears and hissed at Tarou. "What do you mean by that?"

"Come on, Nabiki Tendo. How much are you charging for this little secret?"

"You can't afford my price," she replied in a steely voice.

He shrugged. "Fine, but you can hardly expect me to ignore such an obvious tactical advantage without good reason. And if you won't tell me, then I guess that I'll just have to find out for myself."

"Tarou, I'm warning you...."

With an irritated glance, he drawled, "Warning me of what?"

"The situation here has changed... drastically." She heaved a weary sigh. "Listen, yesterday Ranma came damn close to killing Ryoga and Kuno."

Tarou raised an eyebrow. "What happened? Did pig-boy finally manage to really piss the crossdresser off? That's no big surprise. It was inevitable. But thanks for the warning."

"Tarou! Listen to me. You try a stunt like this again and you could end up DEAD... and I am NOT exaggerating!" The little black cat butted its head against Nabiki's chin and uttered soft, cooing noises, as if trying to comfort her.

He gazed thoughtfully at Nabiki's grim expression. Usually, the middle Tendo daughter enjoyed playing mind games. But this time, he had an uncomfortable feeling that she wasn't dropping provocative hints for the sheer fun of it. She seemed very serious indeed.

(Perhaps she's not exaggerating or lying. This thing with Ranma that she keeps hinting about... it could explain why Happosai didn't go after that mysterious document himself. Why that sneak old bastard!)

As soon as they entered the dojo, the two girls dumped Ranma on the floor. Shampoo quickly closed the doors while Akane grabbed Ranma's face and forced him to look at her. Gazing into his blank, blue-gray eyes, she could see both fear and a frightening amount of hostility. He hadn't slipped into his cat persona yet, but it was close... very, very close.

"Ranma! Please, look at me!"

He reached up and his hands tightened around hers as she held his head. Akane could tell that he was aware of her, but that wasn't enough. He wasn't calming down. Every so often, Ranma would try to turn his head or pull away, but she refused to let go of him. At the moment, there was only one place he would be interested in going... only one person he would be interested in going AFTER....

(I don't know if Tarou's capable of handling Ranma's regular Neko-ken... but I really doubt that even Tarou's monster form is capable of surviving the same sort of attacks that Ranma used yesterday against Ryoga and Kuno.)

"Shampoo?" she said softly.

The Amazon girl had kept her distance from Ranma and Akane. She didn't want to do anything which might set Ranma off or distract Akane from her efforts to reach him.

"Yes?" Shampoo whispered back.

"Get me some cold water."

"Akane, you sure?"

"He knows me, but... I'm still losing him. Maybe changing into his girl-form will be enough to snap him back to normal."

"Shampoo suppose we got no choice." However, she sounded understandably unhappy with the idea.

"Please be careful, okay? If you can't find a closed container, ask Kasumi to bring the water in."

"Right." Shampoo rose to her feet and walked toward the main house and the kitchen. All her movements were slow and steady. It apparently worked because Ranma paid no attention to her departure.

A few minutes later, she returned with a securely lidded kettle.

"What you want Shampoo to do?"

Akane tried to ease one hand free, but Ranma refused to let go of her. She took a deep breath and said, "You're going to have to do it, Shampoo."

"Okay. Akane ready?"

The youngest Tendo daughter nodded.

Gingerly holding the open kettle, Shampoo flung the water away from

her and all over Akane and Ranma. As the cold water splashed all over the two of them, Akane stared in fascination at her close-up view of Ranma's transformation into his new female form.

She could see the subtle shifting of bone and the smoothing of features that transformed a handsome young man's face into the face of an equally beautiful young woman. But the hair and the eyes... especially the eyes... remained unchanged. Ranma-chan's eyes were now the exact same mutable blue-gray as the male Ranma's eyes. But for the first time, Akane could see hidden depths in those eyes... a complexity that enticed and begged for exploration....

Those beguiling eyes suddenly blinked. Ranma-chan released her grip on Akane's hands and slowly shook her head in confusion.

"What the...?"

"Ranma? Are you all right?" Akane dazedly whispered.

Rubbing her forehead, Ranma-chan muttered, "Yeah. I... I think so." She frowned, then pounded her fist on the wet floor. "Shit!"

"What's... wrong?"

"Tarou!" Ranma-chan's shoulders suddenly sagged. "Oh great! Now he knows all about my fear of cats!"

It took a moment for Akane to shake off her bemusement and for the implications to sink in. She turned pale and muttered, "Oh no...."

"'Oh no' is right. You can bet he's...." Ranma-chan stopped, then said, "Uh... Akane?"

"Yes?"

She stared at Akane and slowly turned beet red. The hastily donned bathrobe gaped open both above and below the loosely tied belt, exposing most of Akane's breasts AND her lower body nearly up to her bellybutton. Hastily turning her back, Ranma-chan muttered, "Don't tell me you were running around in front of Tarou dressed like that!?"

"Dressed like what...?" Akane glanced down and blushed furiously. She quickly tucked her legs together and pulled the robe closed.

(Good grief! I didn't even noticed! I was so upset, if Shampoo hadn't given me the bathrobe...!)

Her face flaming with embarrassment, Akane smacked Ranma-chan on the back of the head... but not too hard.

"What did you do that for?" Ranma-chan complained.

"Why didn't you warn me!?" Akane wasn't really feeling angry. It was more habit than anything else.

"Warn you? I only just noticed!"

"Oh sure...."

"Do you think.... Oh, never mind. That can wait. I think we need to worry about Tarou first," Ranma-chan said quietly. She looked at Akane. "I need to talk to him."

"Ranma, are you sure that's a good idea?"

"I've got to somehow convince him not to try something like this again."

Akane sighed, "All right. But let me go out first and make sure that cat's gone."

Ranma-chan twitched nervously. "Fine. You do that."

The door to the dojo suddenly slid open. The conversation between Tarou and Nabiki came to a grinding halt as Akane, her bathrobe now modestly closed, stepped out of the dojo.

"Akane, is Ranma...?" asked a worried Nabiki.

"He's okay. But he wants to talk to Tarou." Her eyes noticed the small, fluffy black cat happily curled up in Nabiki's arms. "Oh no. Don't tell me that this little creature caused all the trouble."

"That's right. Tell Ranma to wait until I come back." Nabiki ran into the house. A few minutes later, she reappeared without the cat.

"What did you do with it?"

"Tucked it inside an empty laundry hamper and weighted down the lid. It's not going anywhere."

Akane nodded. "All right, I'll tell Ranma."

During this conversation, Tarou glanced at his fingernails and managed to look utterly bored.

A low female voice said, "You could have gotten yourself killed, you idiot."

"That's what Nabiki keeps telling me, fem-...." Tarou's voice choked off as a beautiful, black-haired young WOMAN emerged from the shadows of the dojo's interior. Gone was the bouncy, annoyingly cute red-haired girl. Ranma's female form was now as close in appearance to the male Ranma as humanly possible -- hair and eye color, height, age -- while still remaining female... a stunningly beautiful female at that. Tarou was more than a little unnerved to realize that he could barely keep himself from staring at Ranma-chan's perfectly proportioned breasts which the clinging wet tank-top did absolutely nothing to hide.

"What the hell happened to YOU!?" Tarou snapped.

None of the others could recall ever seeing Tarou looking so visibly rattled.

Nabiki said sarcastically, "I told you that things have changed around here. But did you believe me? No...."

"Cut it out, Nabiki," muttered Ranma-chan.

"ACHOOO!"

The pig-tailed young woman turned to look behind her and noticed Akane sniffing loudly. She said, "Hey. Maybe you should go inside and change."

"I'm all right...." Akane sneezed loudly again. "I don't think I should leave you alone with HIM." She gave Tarou an angry look.

Tarou used his usual abrasive manner in order to cover the uneasiness he felt. He smirked and said "If you think that fem-boy here can't talk to me without you holding his hand, then by all means stick around."

Ranma-chan started to turn back in Tarou's direction. Akane hastily grabbed her arm and hissed, "Ranma!"

She patted Akane's hand. "Take it easy. I'll be fine as long as Pantyhose here doesn't do anything STUPID."

Nabiki said, "Sis, the last thing we need is for you to get sick, okay?"

"All right, all right. I'll be RIGHT back." Akane turned and stalked back into the house.

Tarou said, "So... what happened? Did the old pervert hit you with some Jusenkyo water? What is it this time? Spring of the drowned...." His voice suddenly stopped.

(Hold it a minute! With the fem-boy looking like... like....) Tarou's thoughts trailed off incoherently as his gaze involuntarily wandered back to the vicinity of Ranma-chan's chest. It took him a second to get his thoughts back on track. (....looking like THAT, why isn't Happosai all over him?)

"Nope."

"No?"

"That's what I said, okay? I'm pretty sure it has nothing to do with Jusenkyo. Other than that, your guess is as good as mine."

"You seem to be taking this rather well. Or have you just gotten used to the idea of being a crossdresser for the rest of your life?"

"Listen. Being called 'fem-boy' or 'crossdresser' is the least of my problems now."

Tarou gave Ranma-chan a sly grin. "In that case, I suppose I'll just

have to figure out a new name for you. How about 'scaredy-cat'?"

"Don't push your luck, Pantyhose," Ranma-chan said in a flat voice.

Standing inconspicuously off to the side beside Shampoo, Nabiki bit her lip and suppressed the urge to laugh as she watched Ranma-chan absently pull off her tee-shirt. As Shampoo opened her mouth, Nabiki quickly make a hushing gesture.

Tarou narrowed his eyes and snapped, "What do you think you're DOING?"

Ranma-chan started to wring the water from her shirt. "What do you THINK I'm doing? I'm soaking wet, if you haven't noticed."

Tarou couldn't help but notice the moisture gleaming on her bare flesh. The damp tee-shirt had left nothing to the imagination, but now that her shirt was off, he could see... everything. He felt a bead of sweat slide down his neck.

In a low, furious voice, Tarou snarled, "I don't know what your game is, but if you think you're going to...."

Ranma-chan jumped to her feet, apparently unaware that she was totally naked above the waist. Flinging her still wet tee-shirt to the ground in disgust, she put her hands on her hips and glared at Tarou.

"What is your problem, Pantyhose? Will you just cool it!? I'm not going to eat you!"

> (end of Part 6) <p>

Author's Notes:

Tentatively scheduled in Part 7 of Tiger Claw...

....a tense dinner at the Tendos....

> <p>

....a few more suspicious accidents....

> <p>

....Kuno gets some visitors....

> <p>

....another restless night for everyone....

^_-

> CREDITS: <p>

Additional inspiration from:

"The Whisper" by Queensryche

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